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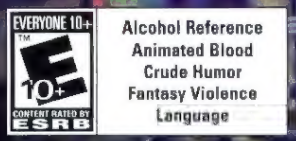

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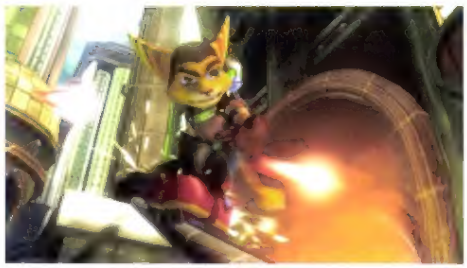

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Jump in.

XBOX 360 LIVE

November 2007

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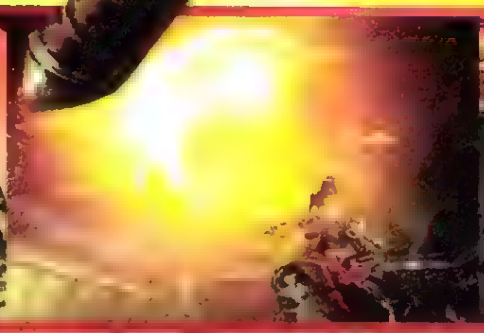

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playback

November 2007

LETTER OF THE MONTH

In Nariko we trust

I have been a distant fan of your magazine for over a year now and after this month, I just might be a felong fan. I consider myself a mature gamer. Not the type that only buys the GTAs/Manhunts/Leisure Suit Larrys, but mature in the sense that I know what I want and won't be swayed by popular opinion. I picked up a copy of Play off the newsstand and was delighted to see Nariko on the cover. I had been following the progress of Heavenly Sword since the first tech demos a year or two ago, before the launch of the PS3. I was psyched about the game and was pumped up for it even more so every time a new tidbit of information was released/leaked about it. I checked my PlayStation store weekly to receive the new Heavenly Sword ame and "making of" videos. I am truly a fan of Nariko, or can't you tell?

I eagerly opened your magazine to page 17 and started to ingest the words of Mr Halverson. With every word I read, he became my envy. I wanted to experience what he was reaying, as I read it. I wanted to sever soldiers, shoot guards in the eye, and to watch this epic story unfold.

I was almost in "gamer tears" (in my mind) when I saw the end score for Heavenly Sword. A 10 was all that I needed to see, to know that my dream would soon be realized. Normally I take a review with a grain of salt, but one sentence solidified my trust: "I didn't just play Heavenly Sword—I studied it."

After seeing numerous internet sites, and a popular television personality of an even more popular video game review show, give Heavenly Sword bad reviews, I was a little worried. I wondered if I just wanted the game to be so good that I ignored any negative opinions about it. Would actually be turning into a fanboy, reluctant to accept what was in front of me just because of my "loyalty" to something that would ultimately not matter? Thankfully I was proven correct in shunning those that did not truly understand what a prolific masterpiece Heavenly Sword is. (I never thought that there would be a villain that could replace Psycho Mantis as my favorite of all time. Flying fox now holds that top spot, because he has... style.)

Thank you Play for taking the time to truly experience a game as rich as this, and finding the pen to convey such a piece of entertainment to us readers. You now have a devoted fan and subscriber for the duration of your publication.

-Ethan D. M

In with the new

Executive editor Brady Fiechter writes in the September 2007 issues that "when I see Call of Duty 4, Resident Evil 5, Metal Gear 4 or any number of the new wave of games at E3, I am again amazed and reminded of the fun of watching worlds change and grow. It continues my excitement, despite the fact that all these games have 4s and 5s attached to their names." I know the feeling, but Fiechter's comment brings up another feeling I've been having. While I have loved seeing the evolution of the black mage costume in the Final Fantasy games from the very first to Tactics to Paine's FF X-2 outfit, do we really need this many Final Fantasy's? Or Marios? Or Metroids?

Or Call of Duty's? Or Metal Gears? Or Resident Evils? Or Silent Hills? Or Contras? At some point soon, since the video game industry has clearly become the new Hollywood, we as gamers need to stop consuming sequels totally and demand nothing but the new. While many gamers are looking forward to Resident Evil 5 and Silent Hill 5, how many have played Haunting Ground? Instead of the three Final Fantasy XIII games to be had in 2008, why not instead see what Sakaguchi's own Lost Odyssey or Blue Dragon are all about? While many are looking forward to Contra 4, honestly, I'm just thinking NES. How many gamers have even considered Eternal Sonata? You play as Polish-French composer Frederic Chopin as he journeys through his dream world during the final three hours of his life. Now that's something new!

Gamers, check out Heather Campbell's review in the September 2007 issue, pages 72-73, along with that issue's poster

Stephen O

Breaking the Triumph Pattern

Take your stone bench, eat your snacks before the show starts, and watch patiently as three criminals, strapped to thick crucifixes are wheeled into the middle of a ring. Three hungry lions appear and soon, inevitably, blood and guts are everywhere, the prisoners die and the show is over.

As you consider whether or not you can make it down to the concession stand and back in time before the gladiator bouts begin, you feel oddly contented by the gruesome spectacle you just witnessed. Maybe you don't realize it consciously, but your values, the values of your society, your world really, have just been balanced. In your mind, justice must always prevail. The execution of the prisoners, their horrible deaths, is the triumph of this principle. Roman dominance ends, countless wars are fought, and history makes its bloody way into the now. Values have shifted in North America though they are not as different from those of the ancient world as some would have you believe. One advancement, however, is society's acceptance of fictional death, instead of actual death, as a means to confirming commonly held values. These are the movies where the bad guy gets it and the good guy wins. You feel better, maybe even great as you consider emulating the protagonist of the film, and content is only critiqued by philosophers and academics.

> "Despite the massive popularity of video games, tragedy, as a concept, has been staved off ..."

Enter the video game. At first, it is seen merely as an interesting novelty, but with greater technological advancement and the introduction of plotlines, stories, and characters, it becomes another means of enacting the triumph pattern. Characters come with built in values that are usually masculine ideals and fantasy, and, in every case, these values are upheld and confirmed by the end of the game, the victory of the player. It is here when video games are dismissed by art critics as a subject of little importance to the human story..

It's an entertainment for now. Films essentially followed the same evolution. People were amazed by the innovation, then they liked movies as an entertainment, and, in little time really, films that strayed from the triumph pattern were released. In short, tragedy, a classic idea, caught up with this medium and began to examine and challenge values instead of always confirming the norm. In very short, some films graduated to the distinction of art. Despite the massive popularity of video games, tragedy, as a concept, has been staved off by mainstream media. Developers have tended to latch on to more accepted mediums, particularly (non-art) films and comics, for their games. Part of this has to do with the seemingly unavoidable victory ending found in games. In each game, a problem arises that the hero must overcome; eventually, the problem is overcome, usually through the acquisition of power and the destruction of the villain. It's a linear structure that fits well with action films and comic books. Yet, this structure is doomed to repeat the triumph pattern, to confirm the expressed values of the protagonist, and therefore the player.

As a small digression, it's worth noting that in the few games where protagonist values don't synch up well with a player's, players often come to dislike the game or feel disgusted by the content. In an even rarer instance, players may even attempt to adjust the values of the character through gameplay. For example, I once witnessed a player avoiding pedestrians and random violence with great effort in Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. He said he felt bad when he just drove over everyone nonchalantly. Of course, this is all anecdotal evidence, though I doubt it's an isolated occurrence, and, as I mentioned, a digression.

A tragic storyline, one where a protagonist's world is not easily traversed through skills or traits he possesses or can possess, is what gaming needs to break out of the basements and into living rooms. Casual gaming has already made it up there, but this is more of a regression, albeit a damned fun one, to the early days of gaming (when games were a novelty, entertainment, etc.); plus, this is not good news for serious gamers.

However, all hope is not lost. Tragedy will catch up with gaming, and the triumph pattern will be set aside for stories and visuals that rattle our very souls. It is only a matter of time before our avatars enter a battle that is not as clear-cut as the notion "might is right." It is only a matter of time before we're a lowly soldier caught up in a war that's so big we've only our immediate circumstances, our humanity to guide us. It is only a matter of time before a game appears that examines human nature and offers an opinion, a view, a theory, or philosophy of its own. Oh my brothers (and sisters), we're close. It's only a matter of time.

Kevin P.

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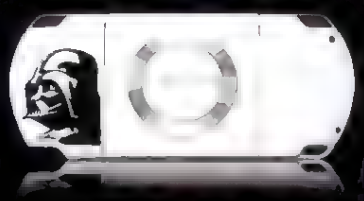

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GIG Exchange

Your skills can pay the bills

words Mike Griffin

Have you ever won a great round in your favorite online game and thought, Damn, I'm good. If it paid to kick ass in this game, it could be my part-time job. Well, the opportunity to wager on yourself while playing top games is quickly approaching and GIG (Global Interactive Games) is one of the companies leading the charge. Co-founder Jason Oh and development lead John Mix spoke to Play about the GIG concept.

play: How did you decide to start GIG Exchange and get into the business of video game betting and wagering?
Jason Oh: It all started when a friend of mine came up to me and said, "Wouldn't it be cool if you could bet on video games online?" First thing I thought was: this shit's gotta be illegal, right? So we looked into it—and this was last year during the time that President Bush was working on that bill to outlaw online poker sites. So I called up a partner, we investigated; turns out for most of the country—all but 15 states—it's perfectly legal. Then when Bush passed that bill in November—we were crossing our fingers, it specifically excluded games of skill. Suddenly we could pursue this.

> "It all started when a friend of mine came up to me and said, "Wouldn't it be cool if you could bet on video games online?" First thing I thought was: this shit's gotta be illegal, right?"
>
> Jason Oh, co-founder, GIG Exchange

So that's the loophole with online wagering: games of skill, not games of chance? That could get tricky in today's complex titles. Pure skill isn't as well defined as, say, the era of Pac Man...
Jason: Right, even titles that include little mini dice games or other clear cases of chance—we can't even go that route, we have to stay clear of those.

Gamers often fear that ideas like this get started by suits that have no clue about games. Do you two actually play games? Let's hear some street cred...
John Mix: For sure, that motivates us. I've been playing games since Atari 400. I've really gotten into the Wii lately. The new Tiger Woods on Wii...we load that up and end up playing it all day.
Jason: Oh yeah. Me, it's Starcraft, Warcraft, the Halos, Fight Night, lots of racing games.

What genres and platforms do you plan to support on GIG Exchange?
John: First-person shooters, strategic titles, fighting games, racing games, anything that's truly skill-based game. When we filed for the patent last year we included PC, consoles, mobile and wireless devices.

So you aim to incorporate the GIG layer directly into games. How will you keep the wagering system consistent across all platforms?
John: We're making the GIG interface uniform and intuitive. We'll customize it so it seems like it's part of the game, integrated as seamlessly as possible—like it's just another option. We know how gamers feel about this stuff. You can have the same level of trust as if you were betting with someone sitting right next to you. And as flexible as possible; you want to wager on a quick 10-minute Madden game? We want that to be easy to set-up.
Jason: And when you create one account, your GIG account, you'll be able to use that account and wager across all the platforms, for all your GIG-enabled games. We'll even have simple, casual titles for mobile users, like games of chess you can bet money on.

What's the lobby process like, and how much money can you wager per session?
Jason: Once you're through the game's front end and into the GIG lobby, you find players and choose a wager; it might be a one dollar game, five dollar game or ten dollar game. After everyone accepts and the game begins, everyone's money is held in a virtual escrow account. After the game, the winner collects these funds. We handle the security with as tough a level of encryption as the most trusted companies out there.

Any big partner names to announce yet?
John: Still a bit too early, but we're in talks with two major multi-platform publishers right now and we should be ready to make some announcements before the end of the year.
Jason: We're also talking to some Hollywood people about doing a weekly GIG show on television and building personalities and stars out of popular players.

Sounds intriguing gentlemen. We look forward to GIG's future developments.

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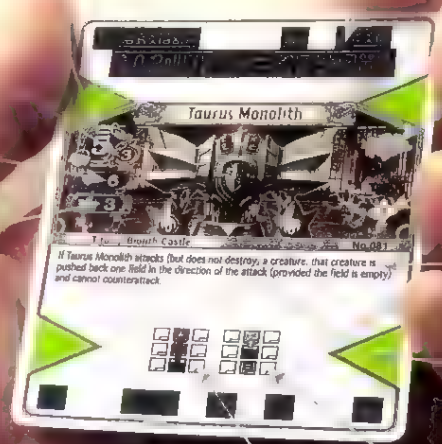

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Attack Power - Denotes the amou this cr when atta

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Attack Zones Icon - ndicates the direction(s) of attack and affected field(s)

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Between the DS and Wii Nintendo sold 786,900 hardware units—more than all of its competitors combined.

Nintendo DS	383,300	12.7 million
Nintendo Wii	403,600	4 million
Xbox 360	276,700	6.3 million
PlayStation 2	202,000	39.1 million
PSP	151,200	8.3 million
PlayStation 3	130,600	1.75 million

Top 10 SKU's August 2007

01	Madden NFL 08	Xbox360	869,600
02	Madden NFL 08	PS2	643,600
03	Bioshock	Xbox360	490,900
04	Madden NFL 08	PS3	336,200
05	Wii Play W/Remote	Wii	256,800
06	Metroid Prime 3	Wii	218,100
07	Mario Stikers	Wii	147,700
08	Guitar Hero 2 W/Guitar	PS2	145,400
09	Mario Party 8	Wii	138,300
10	Guitar Hero Encore: 80s	PS2	127,100

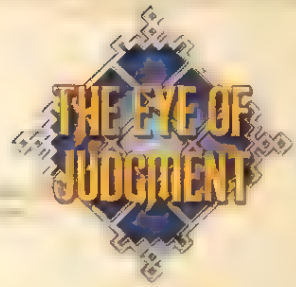
Bioshock: Nearly 10 percent of all 360 owners took the plunge.

Guitar Hero: Officially a phenomenon

Metroid Prime 3 Corruption: Samus' latest opened to less than stellar numbers. Time for another side scroller or a 3rd person adventure?

Madden NFL 08: Still no stopping the Madden train.

And the EYE brings that battle to life.



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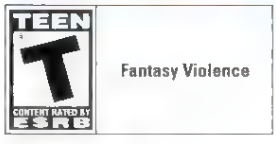

Fantasy Violence

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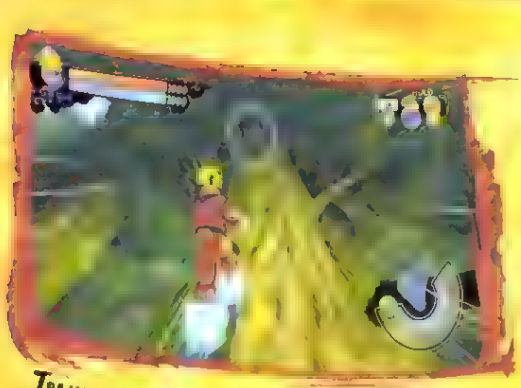
Jump in



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UBISOFT

Golden Axe Beast Rider

Cue the battle drums: Golden Axe is back

'80s/early '90s, the Golden
already swimming around in your head, along with a few
and a level refrain or two. For its time Golden Axe was a
—its double-tap, jump and strike play mechanics an arcade
a chick in a bikini, a chiseled barbarian, and a nasty
Sega really started something. After three Genesis
Sega Ages redux, several obscure
Saturn Fighter, a Sega Ages redux, several obscure
numerous handhelds and various collections, and most
Golden Axe is ready for its 3D

A birds eye view to a kill.

One thing I've learned about Sega is that they do things in their own sweet time. You could stand outside of Sega Japan with a bull horn and a hostage belching out sequel demands and they'd just draw the blinds. The company that became known for its sequels isn't opposed to them; they've just become more diversified since bowing out of the hardware game. In its heyday Sega was like a think tank for stellar brands, in league with Nintendo. They had the Midas touch. But somewhere between the Saturn and the Dreamcast they lost their way. It's taken awhile for them to find their rhythm as a publisher but they've built a real sense of identity of late. After a few fledgling attempts at rekindling their Japanese roots, Sega, as a multinational corporation, has finally come together. With Sega Japan realizing that in certain cases US development is a better option, we're beginning to see the right games from the right developers, which is why the rebirth of Golden Axe is taking place in downtown San Francisco.

You enter Secret Level from the street and proceed down a narrow path where you're greeted by an elevator attendant that checks your credentials (no pat down though) before you're let onto the elevator. The doors open to your typical Bay Area developer's nest—a modern yet dimly lit maze of creative people buzzing

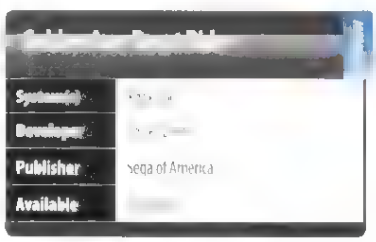
"You could stand outside of Sega Japan with a bull horn and a hostage belching out sequel demands and they'd just draw the blinds."

Belly of the Beast:

"We have taken many of the core fundamentals of the original Golden Axe and reinvented them..."

about mumbling back and forth or staring intensely at their computer screens adorned with various bits and pieces of the game I'm there to play—the sequel claimed dibs on at E3 2005, sight unseen. It took nearly two years to get to this spot but it was worth the wait. There's a swank conference room to my left, coffee at the ready, and a lone 360 controller with my name on it just waiting to glow green.

Although the game is far from its final form, it was almost immediately evident what the team is shooting for. They're not out to reinvent the Golden Axe formula. Their intention is to honor its best attributes while bringing the look and feel into the modern age of gaming. The emphasis remains on brutal hand-to-hand combat, beast riding (hence the title), spell casting and boss battles. What's changed is the execution. With Genius as her Yoda, Tyris takes the lead this time out—although Axe Battler is in here, somewhere—sword in hand, drawing from four types of magic fueled by potions she pounds out of scavenging thieves. In the original game they invaded the heroes' camp, here they appear to pick the bones of Tyris' bludgeoned kin, so more bottles means more magic. Tyris can also dish out combos and block and parry for one-hit beheadings, however, the real meat of the game lies within its beasts. Playing the original it was all about getting on a beast and riding it for as long as you could possibly manage. After playing a lot of Golden Axe and a meeting of the minds with series creator Makoto Uchida, Secret Level obviously knows this. There are many beasts in the new Golden Axe for Tyris to mount and ride freely, picking off enemies by steel or steed, which she can then ride off with into the bleak unknown to use until death do they part. They range from small and nimble to massive and marauding and instill a feeling of pure dominance. Death Adder's minions (did I mention he's back?) will still try to knock you off but it's a far cry from those cramped 2D set pieces on Genesis. This game, among all other things, is open and free. The path is somewhat linear but the feeling of awe—of being a lone barbarian in a hostile land—is its most powerful aphrodisiac. Secret Level are, among many other things, perfectionists. Crafting a fun game is obviously key, but they're really out to put you in Tyris' shoes, and it is here that the game truly shines. The terrain, cabalistic architecture, beasts and characters are pristine next-gen specimens, painstakingly designed, redesigned, fought over and then finally modeled. They also realize that the game's core audience is more prone to a Scorpions concert than a Justin Timberlake special. Beast Rider is bloody and gory, and don't be surprised if you see an exposed breast or two. As for the music, or what I've sampled of it thus far, I think it's safe to assume that the sound designer had himself delivered to a remote location to live on tree bark and berries for awhile while watching *Highlander* on his video iPod. What's a little skin rash for an epic overture's sake really? And so, what was old is new again. They took their own sweet time alright, but the end result will plant our matured behinds back in the saddle once more with that same ear-to-ear grin painted across our faces.

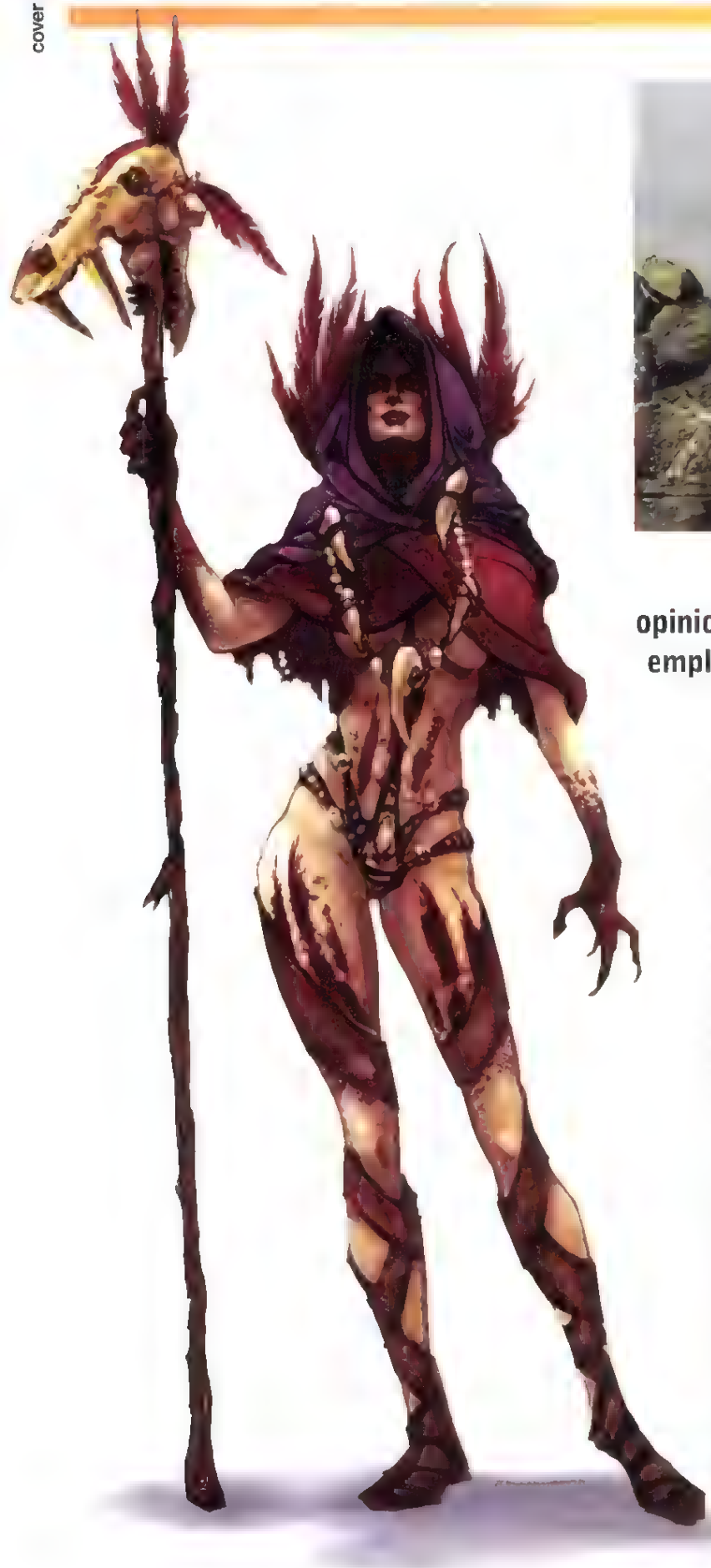


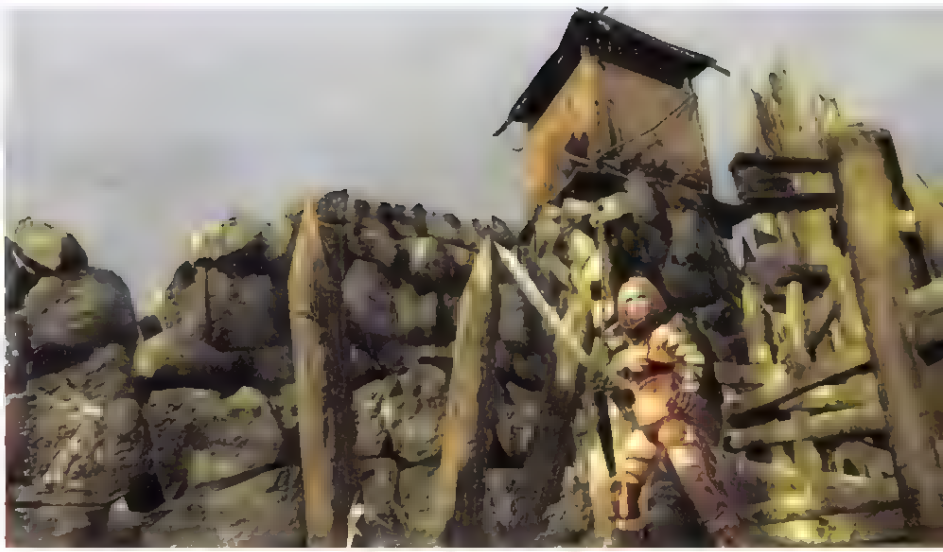
play: Obviously much care is going into this project. What does the opportunity to revitalize a true classic mean to you as a studio?
Darrin Stubbington: We are thrilled to be working on one of the all-time classic Sega co-op games. Golden Axe holds fond memories for many of us at Secret Level (yes, some of us are old enough to have enjoyed the coin-op in the '80s as avid gamers!) and working on this project has given us the chance to really do justice to a great game. We have taken many of the core fundamentals of the original Golden Axe and reinvented them to create what we believe to be a compelling gamer experience.

The design and integrity of the models from the beasts, to the enemies, to Tyris are extraordinary. Is it fair to say that you've gone the extra mile in this department? Has model creation been paramount in the production?
Matt Butler: Yes, every detail of the characters has been meticulously thought out. Costume design was addressed from the point of view of form follows function, tribal affiliation and morality. Tyris is a barbarian and needs her armour to get heavier and stronger as she progresses through the Golden Axe world and meets more substantial enemies, so we created leather, bone and metal armor sets as she battles her way through. However, true to her heritage we did keep a bit of her birthday suit visible; after all, in the first game she was in a red and white bikini! Beast design and creation has been a primary goal of the art team, both to capture the essence of the previous Golden Axe games and to allow us to have fun in creating a new and exciting player experience for the next generation consoles. For example, The Kromath, one of our huge strong battle beasts, has a look and response you would expect if you rode a rhino in to battle.

The walls around certain villages appear to be built stone by stone. Are they?
Indeed, some of the walls are built brick by brick but most are textured with normal maps as we always are aware of memory budgets. We especially keep the detail in our models where the camera and the player's view is concentrated.
Detailing the relevant places allows us to fool the eye into thinking it is a rich real world using much the same theory as a water color artist paints a picture.
It's also a directive of the art team to keep the set dressing as believable as possible so it does not detract from the player's total immersion in the Golden Axe world.

In fact, all of the terrain looks photo-real, down to the ground itself (which is often where many games cheat), with much of it appearing almost alien in formation. What type of research did you do to achieve the look of the environments?
Silvio Aebischer: Some of the terrains have a history of abuse through magic to bring about Death Adder, so we tried to look





"We gathered many opinions from internal Sega employees and from actual Golden Axe fans."

at decay of all sorts. We looked at micro photography of tissue and minerals, and combined it with more realistic terrains. But it's absolutely amazing what nature already combines if you spend enough time looking for it

The game has an epic medieval aura—but not in the traditional hack 'n' slash sense. There's a real nomadic sense here as well as a true sense of scale. You've really captured the feeling of a lone barbarian that's all your own. Is this the work of a single level designer or group input?

Nigel Cook: The nomadic feeling was definitely one of our goals. We wanted to establish a unique feeling for the world to set the game apart from the typical medieval settings we've seen so much. During pre-production, we identified the feeling and mood we wanted for a next-gen Golden Axe title. We liked the idea of feeling like a single warrior amidst this massive world—a lone hero with a singular goal that felt overwhelming. Massive Titan skeletons, glorious mountain ranges and architecture that varies from pure nomadic tribal settlements to massive stone structures help to create a sense of world that we feel is really special. Amidst this grandeur you must travel across the land trying to catch up to the last living titan as it's being dragged across the lands by Death Adder's twin henchmen. This was identified by the core team and was a rule we applied across all the levels as they are being developed by the design and art teams

Art-wise are you inspired by Simon Beasley or Fran Frazetta? I'm reminded of both... The art direction here is simply stunning.

Aebischer: We looked at many references, including the Hudson River School, Bierstadt paintings, European comics, medievalism, and certainly Frazetta and Beasley for their rawness, and force. Trying to blend dramatic environments with brute force has been a great drive for all of us.

What was the thinking behind going with a single playable character as opposed to the option of three?

Cook: This was obviously a big topic. We evaluated both options and over time we decided to build a single-character game with a in-depth combat system with strategies and tactics to learn and use against single and groups of enemies, rather than developing a more familiar hack 'n' slash system. The choice to focus on a single character was in part due to the desire to reintroduce the franchise with a single iconic character as well as the desire to fully realize the combat ambitions the team had without spreading that effort to three characters. It was part of a longer-term strategy to roll out the franchise over multiple titles that would culminate with the reunion of all three characters

How did you arrive at Tyris Flare as the star?

We gathered many opinions from internal Sega employees and from actual Golden Axe fans. To be honest it was pretty much a split decision between Tyris Flare and Gilius Thunderhead. What pushed us over the edge in choosing Tyris was her unique combat style—a mixture of half gladiator, half barbarian along with her motivation for revenge against Death Adder. She is also very pleasing on the eye!

Surely Gilius must fit into the equation somewhere...

Gilius continues to be a very important character to us. He serves a more narrative

Nasty little scavengers, but they sure can take a beating.

role in this title since he is the oldest and wisest of the three original characters. We have big plans for him in the future

Okay then. So how does this game fall into the overall timeline? Is this the Tyris we know or a descendant?
The game positions itself as the first chapter in a complete re-imagining of the original Golden Axe game. The relationships between the characters are more complex and interesting, and the goal is to draw the three together through their common struggles. So these are the same characters – but we now know a lot more about them

I like that you're building on the game's core play mechanics rather than overcomplicating things. There are so few pure action games these days. Was this the plan from day one or was there ever talk of going in a different direction?
There were definitely some experiments and dead ends We were interested for awhile in exploring a kind of chase mode where the player would be able to pursue opponents (or the opposite) and even sketch some Mad Max-like fantasy chariots and wagons. We found though this did indeed overcomplicate things and confused the purity of the gameplay. Also solving for level design issues for foot and mounted modes was challenging enough, nevermind trying to solve a new chase mode as well

Tyris has a nimble jump. Will there be any platforming elements or is this primarily for melee purposes?
Some things should be kept pure when converting from an original arcade game Tyris' jump attacks are just that. It's solely used to dismount enemies from their beasts so you can quickly saddle up and steal them as well as brutally knocking enemies down to the ground—rather than going in the platformer direction, which was never part of the plan

Does her sword change at all over the course of the game?
Tyris gains new swords at the end of each act in the game Each sword is an upgrade from the previous weapon—which Tyris will need as she is challenged by bigger and stronger enemies

What about kicks and combo attacks?
Tyris has a large number of combo attacks that are simple to execute, but difficult to master when used against enemies. Within a combo Tyris may also kick, punch and use the hilt of her sword against enemies

Tyris Flare: Best dressed B.C.

Players can also perform the kick, which is used as a knockback on certain enemies and more importantly for Gnome Kicking (our favorite sport)!

How intelligent is the enemy? Will they see or hear her from afar and attack or is this more the horde system? Will there be much strategy to the combat such as drawing them out one by one or do they attack in waves?
The focus for enemies is to act differently when they attack alone, or are in groups. Enemies that attack alone tend to be of the tougher variety who may have combo moves, and the ability to block/parry and ride beasts as well as spell casting abilities. These types require the player to expose their weakness and simply hack 'n' slashing them will take a long time to kill them, as many are armored. At the same time, we realize it's fun to have a large group of fodder enemies run into the scene and attack to overwhelm you, so rather than trying to block/parry and counter attack, a few light and heavy attacks will do the trick.
In terms of how they first initiate combat, this is controlled by their actual type and what their main role is. For instance a fully armored knight whose purpose is to be a sentry that guards a gate will only attack when you get close and he will not chase you far, as his role is to guard the door. Other enemy types may be positioned to surprise the player by ambushing, while others reside in their campsites and will do all they can to slow Tyris down so she cannot save the last Titan.

"Beyond the main five beasts, each has a number of variations, including fully armored versions that are the ultimate war machines."

Death Adder still the source of tyranny in the land? Any new über bad guys?
Death Adder remains as our ultimate villain. He's definitely at the top of the "bad guy" food chain. But he's not alone: on the boss family tree we also have his henchmen, giant twins from the original game. The Queen of Dead... General Enq...and a series of mini-bosses who posses all the abilities from their lower ranked family members such as melee combat skills, beast riding skills and spell casting.

What are you going for boss-wise: huge behemoths or more along the lines of General Heartland-style hammer giants?
Most of the bosses will not be huge giants, and instead focus on reusing core mechanics against modestly larger and more complicated opponents, with additional surprises.

I've noticed Longmoans, Death Bringers, and Knights so far. Are there Amazons, Skeletons, Bad Brothers, etc. in the new game? How many new additions are there to Death Adder's minions?
All of the above enemies from the original game are in, although our interpretations will be different but still recognizable to the fans of the arcade.

Beasts play a huge role in the new game. How many types will there be total?
Nige: We have five main beasts in the game, all with

5 Questions

Golden Axe creator Makoto Uchida...

01 Tell us the story behind Golden Axe and what your inspiration was for the game?
Uchida: I'm a big fan of action movies and I really love Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Conan*. When I saw that I really wanted to make something that was like that kind of movie but as an arcade video game.

02 How long did the project take and how big was the team on the original Golden Axe?
The team was really small—two programmers, two artists, one sound person and a project lead... Just six of us and we made the game in 12 months.

03 What was the process for how arcade games were designed by SEGA back then?
One thing about arcade games back then is that we needed to think in three-minute increments. When you started the game the first coin usually equaled three minutes of gameplay for the user. So within that first three minutes we had to give the player as many fun things as were possible to encourage them to keep playing.

04 What were the greatest challenges in developing Golden Axe?
The biggest challenge was how to make the magical effects of the spells look amazing from a visual standpoint. We had over 15 of these effects in the original game and that was the biggest technical challenge for the team.

05 Were you happy with the finished product when you saw the cabinet in the arcade?
Definitely! It was great. I enjoyed watching everyone play and the look of "fun" on their faces.

unique control schemes and characteristics that must be learnt and mastered. For example, light beasts are effective at circling their pray and moving in and out, taking small bites to break down enemy groups, while the larger beasts can be used for breaking through walls and barriers and trampling enemies. All with unique physical attacks and magic, including some brutal finishing moves against enemies.
Beyond the main five beasts, each has a number of variations, including fully armored versions that are the ultimate war machines.

Has series creator Makoto Uchida had any involvement? Have you had free reign or have you had to run any new characters by SoJ?
We had the honor of meeting and presenting the game to Makoto Uchida and he was very pleased with our re-imagination of the original arcade game. He and Sega Japan gave us a good amount of freedom when developing the core ideas and direction since Secret Level is a Sega-owned company

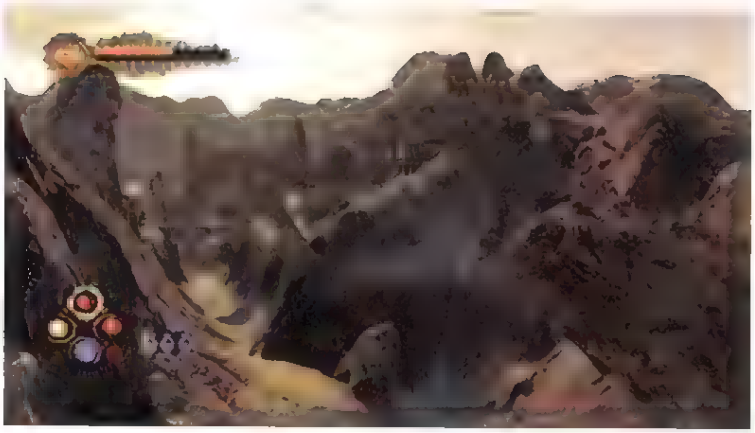
Every inch of the game is normal mapped yet you manage to avoid the shiny plastic look—what's the secret here?
Secret Level has excellent level artists who observe and study the form and texture of real-world objects. This level of expertise and knowledge has been fundamental in the creation of the gritty realism we have been able to achieve within the Golden axe world. We have also had the privilege of using Secret Level's shader system which allows us to add the final polish we need to create fine detail we are looking for

How long has the game been in development? How much time is there to go and where will the bulk of that time be spent?
The game has been in development for 18 months so far. It was a very slow and deliberate start as we kept the core team very small in the beginning so Secret Level could focus on developing our proprietary renderer engine and toolset specifically built for action games. Over the last 12 months the core vision has not been changed or altered except in the area of beast combat, which is not a larger focus for the game.

Do you believe in the 5-8 hour-long actioner or will you draw things out to appease narrow-minded critics?
The game is currently tracking to 10+ hours which should appease the narrow-minded critics. Our focus is to have a short game that is memorable, rather than a longer game with the same gameplay experience spread thinly through it

Music to my ears. Tyris gets scarred and bloody as the game wears on... Does this happen relative to the player or are they set textures?
During combat as Tyris takes hits from

Below: It starts with a vision, followed by a concept, followed by years of hard work.



"The M Rating was a directive from Sega at the very start with the aim to make a bloody and gritty game for mature gamers."

enemies, she does get blooded up in the area she was hit, such as an arm for example.

Will fans recognize any classic music or will the soundtrack be all-new? What are you going for in terms of overall sound? More ambient or more arcade?
Our approach for the soundscape uses a series of short layered music that blends seamlessly in and out depending on what the player is doing at that time. For example, fighting a small group of fodder enemies that are not so threatening for the player will result in one to two layers of combat music to play, while fighting the same group but with a mounted lieutenant enemy that is far more threatening and difficult to kill when you are on foot will result in up to five layers of combat music. Additionally each layer is not the same, some are created for the actual level you are playing in and the enemy type. With localized ambience sounds and sound effects, this results in a soundscape that matches how you are playing the game and the player's unique experience at that time.

Dismemberment, nudity, beheading... Golden Axe has everything a growing boy needs. I take it that Sega realizes the current age of the game's fan base. Any resistance to the M nature of it all or was this a no-brainer?
The M Rating was a directive from Sega at the very start with the aim to make a bloody and gritty game for mature gamers.

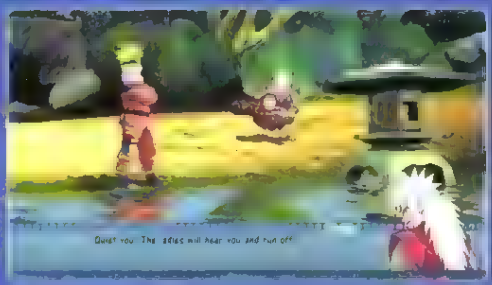
Go Sega! Past Japanese attempts at 3D Genesis sequels have been, well, pretty bad, but you guys seem born to do them. Has there been any talk of keeping this going? Can we place our orders?
Stubbington: Obviously Golden Axe could form the tip of the iceberg for Secret Level in terms of classic Sega IP revitalization, and we would be thrilled to hear everybody's suggestions for which great properties they would like to see in the future!

NARUTO
Rise of a Ninja

Rise and shine

The most successful anime series since "cough-hack" Dragonball Z, Naruto has managed to almost completely avoid the "anime" stigma, which roughly translated means "game, movie or TV series normal people can't assimilate." The truth is that anime, which did deserve that label many moons ago, has come a long, long way. So far in fact that many an old-school "otaku" loathe the new trend of mainstream localized material, which would be a great thing…if only the majority of anime companies didn't continue marketing specifically to all 10 of them. Like Ubisoft, VIZ (Naruto's keeper) knows better, which is why Naruto has made its way down pretty much every avenue of popular culture. But a Japanese anime licensed game created in Montreal? Now that's a stretch. Or at least it was until we saw it in action, which resulted in our August cover.

Now that I've played the game for myself and more extensively, I can honestly say that no Japanese developer has ever come close to capturing the spirit of an anime this religiously, let alone through a game this sophisticated. There have been plenty of good anime games over the years: Ghost in the Shell, Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex, Astro Boy: Omega Factor, the .Hack//G.U. series, Disgaea, Gungrave…but none as exalted as Rise of a Ninja. This is by far the best anime-based game to date. It's the very



Why can't all anime games look like this?!

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From high-resolution model data to countless physics AI and animation programs the massive amount of data in Heavenly Sword's only deliverable on Blu-ray

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With the ability to pick up and throw items or weapons from the floor, use the SIXAXIS control to reach out-of-range enemies with deadly accuracy.

PLAY BEYOND

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ASSASSIN'S CREED

RESTORING PEACE ONE CORPSE AT A TIME

words

Considering it's the hottest title from one of the industry's largest publishers, Assassin's Creed has been surprisingly under-hyped. Maybe Ubisoft was waiting for the Halo 3 fever to die down, or perhaps they're just supremely confident in the title's quality. We experienced a near-final version of Assassin's Creed alongside its two key development figures: Creative Director Patrice Désilets and Producer Jade Raymond. When they're not hanging out with luminaries like Hideo Kojima, this duo is busy putting the final touches on an epic, triple-A assassin adventure at Ubisoft's Montreal studio.

Assassin's Creed

System(s)	[illegible] Xbox 360 PC
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	[illegible]
Online/Multi	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

INTERVIEW

Only a few weeks to go before it's time for the gold master. What's the state of Assassin's Creed and how tough has it been to make this game multiplatform?
Patrice: Right now we're in the debugging phase, so it's close to the end. It's been pretty tough. It isn't easy to fit all this detail (he sweeps the camera out to a gorgeous panorama of Damascus) inside console memory at the same time, and it was a tight fit to get it all onto one DVD for the 360 version because there's so much data. Otherwise, we briefly tried some Sixaxis ideas on PS3 but decided, really, the value wasn't there. All the versions are very close.

(Patrice demonstrates how some crowds in the game have "trolls"—snitches that will fetch a guard if they spot Altair doing something suspicious like climbing walls. Guards come running, and Patrice kills several using vicious, well-animated counter-attacks). **It looks like one guard is terrified. Is this random, or because of Altair's merciless slaughter?**
We actually have a Morale system that kicks in for our soldier AI. If they see you kill too many of their friends in a short amount of time, they become fearful. It also depends on who's in the fight; there are three ranks of soldier—militia, elite and leader. Depending on who you kill in the fight, and how quickly, others' fear and panic will change.

The assassin Altair rides into Damascus.

I like it. An assassin would want a short fight, petrified foes, and a quick return to concealment. It's a nice way to reward efficient fights.
We've also done a lot of work on the AI since E3. Soldiers move and adapt to the fight and how I play. We call it our Staging system; different animations kick

HEAVENLY SWORD

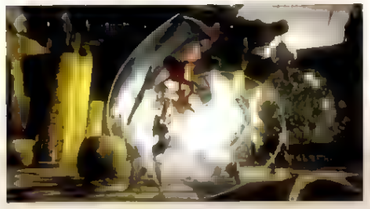
Enter a mystical world where a heroine is caught in a delicate dance between survival and vengeance. With the Heavenly Sword in hand, Nariko mercilessly eviscerates legions of enemies with style and grace. Change up your attacks with different stances to slash at a distance, strike with speed and butcher with brutal force. Soon you'll discover why no hero has been more deadly. No sword more powerful. And why vengeance has never been so beautiful.

RSX GRAPHICS CHIP

To deliver on the epic storyline, the RSX Graphics Chip takes motion-captured performances by Andy Serkis and cast with high-resolution model data and translates them into high-definition CG cut scenes.

CELL BROADBAND ENGINE

The Cell Broadband Engine allows you to encounter legions of enemies with their own individual, group and squad based AI ensuring that you'll never have the same experience twice.



Blood
Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence

HAS NEVER BEEN SO BEAUTIFUL

heavenlysword.com

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picture of modern game development, yet represents the decidedly Japanese brand it's based on perfectly from the snarky dialogue to the eccentric ninja action. If you like games that take you away like Zelda and BioShock, RoaN is the cartoon equivalent of that level of immersion.

If you're familiar with the series you'll immediately recognize exactly where you are and roughly what's to come, but it's almost better not knowing. In a nutshell, Naruto is a ninja in training who dreams of one day becoming Hokage—leader of all the ninja in his village (he wants to be king). But he's a total f&%k up, prone to defacing property and causing a general nuisance due to his upbringing as an orphan and outcast—an unfortunate fate bestowed upon him when his father, the fourth Hokage, sacrificed his own life to seal a rampaging

> "There's just so much here it's nearly impossible to describe. You really must experience it for yourself."

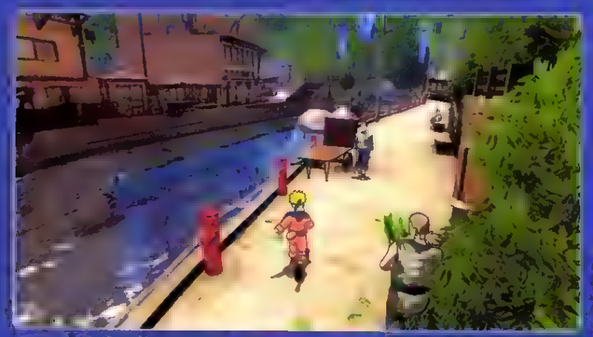
demon nine-tailed fox into his baby son's body. Forbidden by the third Hokage to ever reveal this to Naruto, the village takes to shunning him.

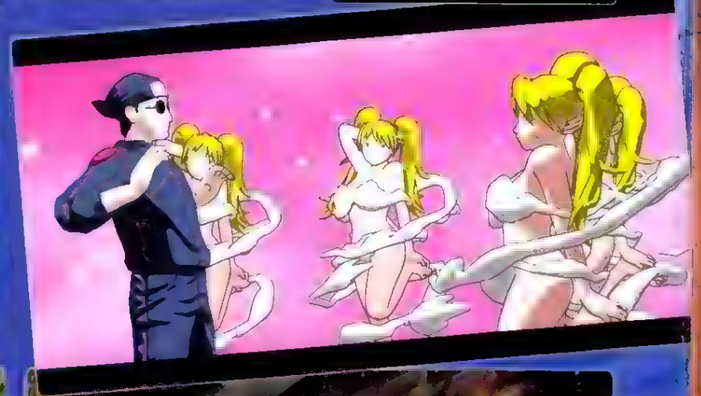
The general construct of the game has Naruto doing two things: taking quests from the Hokage depicted by orange scrolls that increase health, and accepting missions from his sensei depicted by blue scrolls that increase chakra. Both of which involve some of the most breathtaking and well-produced platforming and fighting on any-gen. The platforming is especially fresh in its approach. Along with your standard double jump, hang, and lift scheme, Naruto can traverse thick forests like a monkey possessed by quickly pressing A on each tree branch as you aim for the next open limb or plateau. All of the terrain outside of town begs to be explored. Coins used to earn new Jutsu (ninja tricks) can be spotted from afar and depending on what level Naruto is at he can usually find a way to snag them. Currency is the game's other commodity, which Naruto earns by completing missions and defeating opponents, and can be used for many things. Initially you'll want to stock up on Ramen (once you help get the shop open) and purchase scrolls, but as the game wears on you'll find more and more places to spend your money. Next there's the fighting, which could be considered a game in its own right if it wasn't already via both Vs. and Tournament modes. The core system is based on blocks, combos, and a high-low move set, but the real challenge comes by way of knowing how to squeeze in Jutsu, which is currently my only beef with the game. The system is easy enough (holding the left trigger while performing a simple analog pattern), but the ensuing gauge is far too finicky to risk ever using the system in battle... Of course the CPU has no problem. I hope this gets addressed as using Jutsu is key in both battle and exploration. Yet another aspect of the game is navigating Leaf Village—quite possibly the largest and most beautiful city ever depicted in a video game—while doing whatever you can to get the villagers to like you. Naruto begins the game with a screen full of angry face icons that turn to smileys one by one as you complete various tasks and errands for people—yet another aspect of the game that could be considered a game in itself.

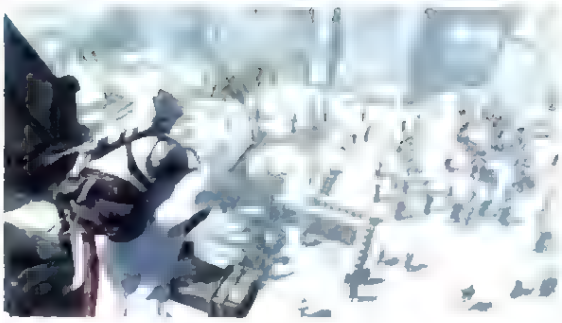
There's just so much here it's nearly impossible to describe. You really must experience it for yourself. The easy way to preface it would be as GTA for anime, ninja, platforming or fighting fans; but it's so much more than that. There's so much more gameplay here. It's easily the richest action RPG ever, and hands down the prettiest. I can count the number of games that submerged me to this degree on two hands in my 20-plus years of gaming. I'm still pinching myself that it even exists.

Naruto: Rise of a Ninja

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	2 player vs.
Available	November







Perched and pensive like a bird of prey.

A decadent ruler addresses the throng.

in, changing the pace of the fight. If I keep tap-tapping the attack, they'll start using defensive stance and won't be as easy to fight. If I stay in defense, they'll start closing in with attacks. Of course the goal of the game is not to kill *everyone*. We do action, stealth, pick pocket and social stealth.

Whether he stays out of fights or not, Altair's reputation must precede him...
Oh yes. And as he progresses in the game and kills more key characters, the soldiers will be more and more informed of the assassin, so it becomes harder for Altair to pass by guards in the street (you walk slowly with hood drawn over face) without being noticed. Your mission is to stop the Third Crusade, and in the process you kill a lot of important people in the cities.

As Producer, Jade, you're very close to the game, but surely you still have a favorite experience or perhaps a preferred region of the Holy Land?
Jade Raymond: I love the feeling as you ride out of the countryside on horseback to see a huge ancient city enter the horizon. Our Art director Raphael Lacoste and his tremendously talented team of artists have done a beautiful job.

The Syrian countryside makes for a very pretty hub. How close is your world to the reality of the Middle East in 1191 AD?
I don't want to toot our own horn too much so I will quote Dr. Cobb our Historian, who also worked with Ridley Scott on Kingdom of Heaven. After reviewing Assassin's Creed for historical accuracy, check out this excerpt of what he had to say: "I am thoroughly impressed. Please give my congratulations to whoever it is who designed the environments, because they are about as perfect as I could imagine them—clearly this person has done their homework, not just in books but in the actual settings. The way the light falls, the slight decay, the colors, the landscape all perfect. The architectural detail is also perfect. .To conclude: not just splendid, but actually remarkable. Well done.'

That says a lot about world design and gameplay—that you've managed to represent the region so well without compromising the sandbox effect.

You've probably seen a lot of people play through the whole game. What's the average duration of the campaign?
In playtests we've had to ask the players *not* to do the optional objectives and sandbox stuff because it was taking them too long—40+ hours—to finish the playtest. It's a pretty good sign when you have to ask people to stop playing your game so that you can test difficulty level of the missions. When we ask people to do the minimum walkthrough only completing mandatory objectives, it takes them about 16 hours. The thing I'm personally most surprised about is that even though I've played through missions multiple times—like more then any sane player would, I continue to discover new things about them, new possible strategies, new ways to succeed. Sometimes I approach on roof tops and try to take out the surrounding guards before going in for a perfect kill. Sometimes just try and create chaos and rely on my fighting skills to take everyone out, Conan the Barbarian style. It's incredibly satisfying to experiment with new strategies: for example, try to kill all of the guards without using your weapons—just throwing them off of tall buildings. Hopefully other people will derive this same kind of sick enjoyment from messing with our game systems [laughs].

> "YOUR MISSION IS TO STOP THE THIRD CRUSADE, AND IN THE PROCESS YOU KILL A LOT OF IMPORTANT PEOPLE..."

We haven't heard very much about AC's Rank system. Can you break it down for us, and provide some real examples of how and why Altair's rank progresses?
There are 9 Assassin ranks. You start the game as a Master Assassin but mess up on your first mission. As a result, your superior Al-Mualim strips you of your rank and you spend the rest of the game trying to win back your standing within the Assassins. Every time you complete an Assassination you rank up and equipment is restored to you. Sometimes it's a new weapon that changes the dynamic of fights, like throwing knives that let you dispatch of enemies at a distance. Other times you earn items that change the way you interact with your environment. For example, at Rank 4 you obtain Gloves that give you better grasping ability. This completely changes climbing and free running because you can descend buildings quickly by letting go and then grabbing back on; when you jump towards an edge your new gloves allow you to reach and grab on to things that were previously out of reach, and if you're falling because you've been hit by an arrow or other projectile, you can catch yourself before you plummet to your death. Other items like boots and special belts allow you to interact with the town crowd in new ways. Ranking up is more then just getting a sword that does more damage; it changes gameplay strategies available to you.

How cutthroat is the Hashashin society in Assassin's Creed, and is there a general code of conduct in this brotherhood? What do the peons of Masyaf (the assassin city, Altair's HQ) think of their shady neighbors?
When you are an Assassin, there is a code to respect—the Creed.

First: never hurt an innocent.
Second: always be discreet.
Third: do not compromise the brotherhood.

Every Assassin must respect the creed; those who do not respect it can end up in a lot of trouble. As far as their Masyaf neighbors are concerned, the presence of the Assassins is not troubling to them since the Assassins are there to bring back peace. If you look at the first rule of the creed, it's crystal clear: never hurt an innocent.

Altair is a strong character. Surely he has his own beliefs and convictions when it comes to the Crusades and meddling foreigners...
Altair fights for peace. His objective is to restore peace in the region by taking out those who profit from the war. The interesting thing about the history of the Assassins is that they were not on either side of the war or directly involved in either the Crusader or Saracen plight. There is still a lot of mystery surrounding the Assassin's goals and origins and this has allowed us to reinvent Altair and his clan.

The skills that allow the assassin Altair to prosper in Acre, Damascus and Jerusalem in 1191 AD may not be conducive to futuristic assassination in modern cities. In future instalments of the Assassin's Creed trilogy, will the new timelines introduce assassins with their own set of gameplay particulars?
I wish I could give you more info on this but as far as future instalments are concerned, all I can say is that I hope Assassin's is successful enough that we get to do the sequel because we have a lot of amazing ideas we'd love to work on.

And we'd love to see them. Thanks for taking the time, Patrice and Jade.

play

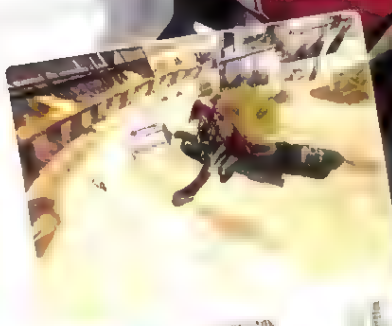
Nitrobike

Jet Moto Madness!

words

This one really did come out of Left Field. There I was minding my own business when all of a sudden Ubisoft drops a near complete Wii exclusive racer on me, from none other than Left Field, creators of Excite Bike 64! Strap on your skid lids people, we're going racing!

First things first (I see that look on your face...). You're not loopy, the riders really are too small for the bikes. Either that or the bikes are huge. Either way it's so disproportionate that it actually works. It's when designers go for reality and miss that things get messy. Left Field is obviously going for a super-exaggerated look with Nitrobike and I have to say I like it. Reminds me of Stunt Race FX, another funky Nintendo racer that I couldn't get enough of. That game's hook was the FX chip (look it up). Nitrobike's is the Wiimote and does it ever deliver the fun. It may not be the prettiest racer out there but for my money it dusts all the me-too next-gen racers that emphasize the show but do the same old thing when it comes to the go. The Wiimote is basically your handle bars, with boost on the cross pad, throttle on 2, brake on 1, and tricks on 1 plus the cross pad. It's not just straight racing either. Each area offers a variation of challenges along with traditional races in order to build up enough points to compete in each main event. And there are at least 40 courses so this one should last a good long time. It's taken awhile for someone to trump Excite Truck – yes, I liked it – but Nitrobike smokes it with a vengeance.



Nitrobike	
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Left Field
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

Make room on the couch: Up to 4 players can duke it out.

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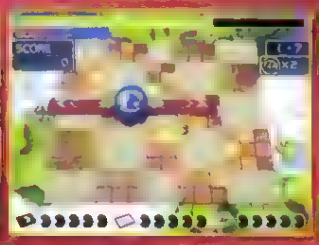
PAC'N ROLL® REMIX
[illegible] and navigate Pac-Man through [illegible]

GALAGA® REMIX
Protect Pac-Man as he rolls through [illegible] and shoot down invading forces before they attack him.



PAC-MOTOS
Be ready to battle and knock your opponents off stage [illegible]

RALLY-X REMIX
[illegible] from each other.

EATER PANIC® REMIX
Use Pac-Man to whack hungry [illegible] on the screen.

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Mild Cartoon Violence

Wii

NINTENDO DS™

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Shonen Jump One Piece Unlimited Adventure

One Piece sets sail on Wii

It's a well-known fact that the easiest road to an anime fan's purse strings runs directly through the fighting-game genre. It's faster and easier to design a game around pre-determined attributes and settings after all, rather than actually create something original. But that road has become so overly traversed that the paint is chipping off the "road closed" sign as we've all been down it several, if not one too many, times.

One of two anime licenses to discover the freedom of adventure, it's built right into the title of this one, and developer Ganbarion really knows how to exercise their right to run amok.

For the uninitiated, One Piece (as seen on Kids WB in edited form) is the world's most unconventional pirate's tale. Aside from the basics (love of treasure, a big ship, and rampant delinquency), the Straw Hat pirates are decidedly...funky. Imagine The Lost Boys and Davey Jones's crew scrambled together with a hint of hallucinogenic.

Unconventional is a good way to describe the game as well. A grand adventure in the vein of Zelda, Unlimited Adventure stars all eight crew members selectable on the fly, as you explore a vast and mysterious island conjured out of the sea by an orb that Luffy (Captain Monkey D. Luffy that is) caught fishing off the side of the ship. The orb turns out to have a strange connection with the island, manifested in sealed orbs throughout which the crew must activate by collecting elements to build tools and raw materials to feed each orb. Sounds complicated, I know, but not to worry...they throb.

Deeply rooted in exploration and puzzle solving a la Zelda and Metroid—only more so and in its own unique way—there's also ample combat to be had (where there's

Usopp's ranged attack makes up for having to gaze upon his supreme funkiness.

treasure there's always pirates) bu lt on a system that bestows new powers on each character the more you ut lize them, creating a layer of combat deptn beyond anything the genre has to offer There's a so some welcome platforming on hand and more c ever d versions than you can shake a coconut at. Special moves and new tools evolve for the duration on top of a slew of other systems (such as catching and ident fy ng nd genous bugs) that keep the game fresh over the ong hau . The guardian of each seal is made n the image of an enemy from the crew's past (which come to life prov d ng the game's boss batt es) allowing scenes from the anime to seep in, but otherwise th s s a comp etely or g na story ne It's also exclus ve to the Wii and utterly g gantic. Aside from over 40 hours of high adventure, up to 40 characters can be unlocked to use in Vs or survival mode. This s a huge game

've been very critica of N ntendo's handl ng of the Wii, namely the decision to a ow any and all ports onto the system, and th s is a perfect example of why When you're s tting on America's number-one sell ng console a little discretion can go a long way

One Piece being an exclusive Wi t t e, it makes ideal use of the contro s and the hardware, which flexes ts we l-toned musc es via mass ve panoramas, beaut ful textures and seamless ce shading. A though not on par with the 360 or PS3, the Wi really is next-gen. It's nice to finally get a look at it in action If Nintendo forced the ssue as t d d back in the SNES days, the Wii could dom nate the enthus ast base as we as Reggie's casua gamer army. The price certainly is r ght

Shonen Jump One Piece: Unlimited Adventure	
System(s)	Wii
Developer	[illegible]
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Online/Multi	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

"A grand adventure in the vein of Zelda, Unlimited Adventure stars all eight crew members selectable on the fly, as you explore a vast and mysterious island..."

800
LOST
NO SHOPPING
100 FEET
VEHICLES TOWED
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PROCEED WITH
FLASHING
NASTY NAILS
NAILS CARE AND WAXING
GO NEAWAY
PASSENGER ZONE
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49
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SCION

what moves you

Kane & Lynch Dead Men

Like Abbott and Costello, with more killing...

words Greg Orlando

"Kane is a mercenary, and Lynch is just plain psychotic..."

Ah, Misters Kane and Lynch. What sublime and gentle adventures await them: afternoon tea; evenings at the theatre; brandy and cigars in the parlor; discussions about Jean-Paul Sartre, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Gertrude Stein; and endless games of croquet on the lawn.

Or, rather, what sublime and gentle adventures would await Misters Kane and Lynch if they weren't busy killing everyone, blowing stuff up, and trying to prevent the occasional psychotic blackout.

Kane and Lynch are an odd couple of sorts, only substituting brutality and naked aggression for lighthearted comedy. Kane is a mercenary, and Lynch is just plain psychotic; the two begin their violent, third-person perspective adventures in the back of a prison van from which they're both unceremoniously sprung.

Lynch is as personable as a rattlesnake, and less well mannered. Given the choice, Kane might not opt to walk on the same side as the street as Lynch. Fate has aligned against him, however, and Kane is forced to partner with Lynch in order to retrieve a series of valuables for a mysterious cabal. Lynch becomes Kane's handler, then, reporting in at regular intervals. In the single-player adventure, players control Kane, and will need to keep their partner safe; cooperative play allows for a second person to control Lynch.

This amoral tale has Kane and Lynch escaping from a prison van, fleeing from the cops and eventually finding refuge in a donut shop before rescue. The pair will later need to infiltrate a bank, a job that goes horribly wrong when Lynch snaps and begins killing hostages indiscriminately. Here, players will need to race up from the bank's vault to the lobby to discover, well, that hell has broken loose. The cops are holed up outside the doors, the hostages are dead, and the getaway van is nowhere to be found. What follows is a fairly tense shooting sequence made all the more frantic by the appearance of sniper rifle scopes shown on the game screen. If Kane is caught in the scope for more than a second, he's a dead man.

Later, players will have to infiltrate a Japanese nightclub, pushing their way past a throng of partiers. They'll need to push their way out, too, only the mob will be fleeing in panic after many gunshots. Lynch, of course, will not be able to participate in the fracas because he'll be carrying the club's owner over his shoulder. This stage challenges players to find and dispatch the club's gun-toting security amid the crowd while simultaneously trying to keep Lynch safe, and is one of the more interesting pieces of the overall puzzle.

Developer IO Interactive, known for the Hitman series, has added a series of squad-based mechanics to Dead Men, too. Players will get to direct the actions of a series of gunmen, with point-and-click commands used to send soldiers across the battlefield. That's some dirty work right there, but par for the course for the mercenary and the unrepentant psycho.

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

System(s)	PlayStation, Xbox, PC
Developer	IO Interactive
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	1-2
Available	november

Somebody's really got it in for columns.

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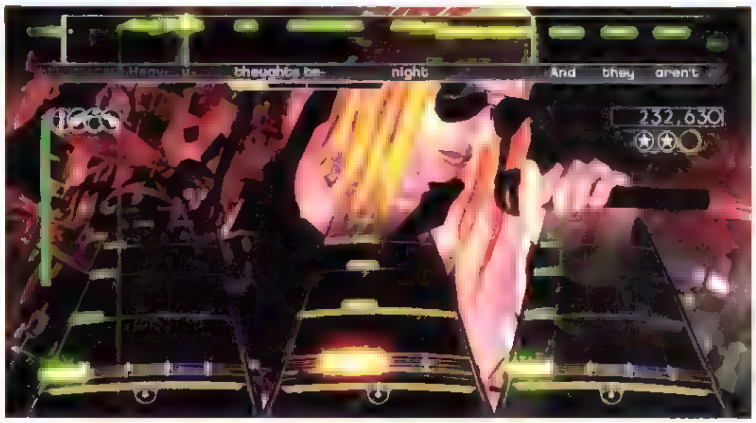
(s07)

ROCK BAND

"It really does make a difference when you're interacting with the real Shirley Manson and her band Garbage."

Everything but the garage

Brady Fiechter



Triple bass and flames!? Eat your heart out Tommy Lee

There's a fundamental rule every first timer must abide by when stepping into the highly decorated Rock Band preview room over at EA: sing your heart out. This can be especially difficult when a) you're only used to being a purely solo rock star in the shower and the car and b) there's no alcohol to fuel the rock fire. I resisted but the rule stood, and Radiohead's *Creep* now stands as my first public vocal humiliation. I loved it.

My rookie performance was at times deemed "awesome" as Rock Band tracked my voice throughout the song, taking the karaoke inspirations to an entirely different level of satisfaction. Gratefully, the easy setting is especially forgiving, but if you have the confidence, you can ratchet up the demands on your performance to "expert," which, along with guitar, bass and drum, takes some mad skills.

Joining Radiohead on the track list will initially include 39 other great songs from a variety of awesome bands like Nirvana, The Ramones, Stone Temple Pilots and a personal favorite, Faith No More. Most of the songs are brought over from the master recordings. It really does make a difference when you're interacting with the real Shirley Manson and her band Garbage. Following the game's release you'll be able to download a ton of additional songs—a Metallica collection is worth pointing out as one of the first to be available—and if you want entire albums, periodic releases from bands like The Who will start making their way into the mix.

Create your own rock star, compete online, live out a virtual tour—some of these features are mostly just bullet-point descriptors at the moment. My experience so far with Rock Band has been to simply and quite awesomely jam with three other people, one song at a time. The sensation is a little special when you all hit the mark together and the game calls out your infectiously flowing group effort.

Push aside for a moment what Rock Band might ultimately achieve as a critically accepted product in its final form, right now I'll say this: is a continuation of one of the best things to come out of the medium of video games.

System(s)	[illegible]
Developer	[illegible]
Publisher	MTV Games, distributor EA
Available	[illegible]

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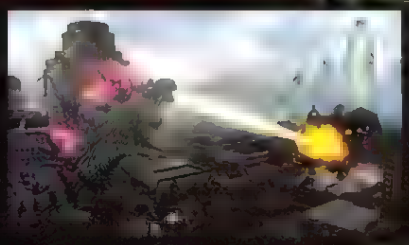

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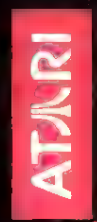
Wii

PlayStation.2



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Naruto
Clash of Ninja Revolution

Fight Again!

words Dave Haverson

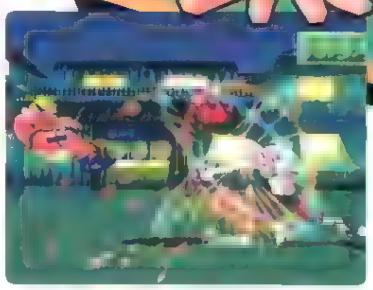
As an anime fan I'd be lying if I didn't say I've had it up to here (holds right hand above head) with fighting games, especially Naruto fighting games. I realize that the show is all the rage, but the cow is anorexic. That said I can still understand why third parties keep dealing them out, in this case especially. It's the first Naruto fighter for the Wii after all and the console does have a massive youth base, so why not? At the end of the day it's about the shortest distance to the goal and in this case it's via bringing the Japanese CoNR stateside to do a little Jutsu on the Wii faithful in the land of the freaky. But Tomy didn't merely stick it into a new sleeve, they've actually busted open the code and increased the speed of four-player mode—an area in which the game really shines—added new character renders and environment art to match where the US anime is chronologically; added two levels (going from six to eight) and added six new characters to the old roster of 14.

There are a few things the Wii game does especially well. Those of you in the market for a fighter that allows you and your Wii buddies to fall about after school are in luck.

Make room because all of the moves in CoNR can be performed via waving the Wiimote. Anything that is thrown and connects is performed via movement. You can use A to punch but you'll get your butt kicked. This game's a workout. Using the Nunchuk for movement and the Wiimote for a myriad of techniques, the game has deep, unique nuances provided you take the time to really master it. Mission and Training modes both offer roads to becoming a Jonin. Honestly though, I selected the single-player game right off the bat and didn't lose a single battle until Gaara (the final boss) by just feeling my way through the game using a combination of horizontal and vertical Wiimote shakes along with some dodging and button pounding. Tis the nature of the beast I suppose. Ever see a DOA pro get schooled by a first timer? It's just the nature of things outside of the Street Fighters of the world. Fighting in a two- or four player duel, however, this doesn't work so well nor will it get you through Mission mode, but it bears mentioning for those of you who fight solo. The real fun in this game is in mastering it. A lot has gone into the system, including DoA-style transitions (only in real time so you can punch in transition), hiding, various air attacks, Jutsu galore, chain combos, etc... There's a lot of game here for fans to dive into.

For Naruto fans picking this up as their first Naruto fighting game it comes highly recommended, but for the war-torn anime fighter who is happy to move into the realm of adventure in games like Naruto Rise of a Ninja on 360 and One Piece Ultimate Adventure on Wii, it may seem far less exciting... Still a great workout though.

The multi-player in Revolution really shines.

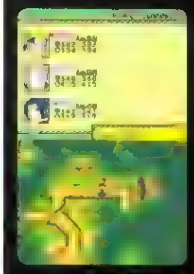


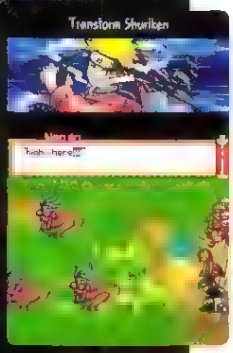
Naruto: Clash of Ninja Revolution	
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Sing
Publisher	Tomy
Online/Multi	1-4 player
Available	[illegible]

Naruto: Path of the Ninja

Tomy/DS

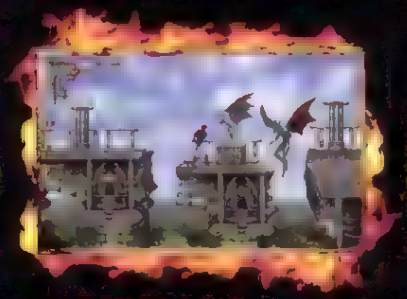
Traditional role playing hits the DS October 23, Naruto style. Path looks and plays like all those great top-down 16-bit RPGs of old, with old-school Lunar/FF-style turn-based battles, full voice, and an original storyline.





Naruto goes all old school on DS!

To end his thirst for blood,
you must develop one of your own.



Castlevania
The Dracula X Chronicles

Coming October 2007

At long last the Beaumont family's quest to destroy Dracula is here for the PSP. This time it's a double curse featuring *Symphony of the Night* and the first ever U.S. release of *Rondo of Blood*. *The Dracula X Chronicles* will let you drink up new game modes, items and enemies in gruesome 2D or blood-curdling 3D graphics.

TEEN
T
Blood and Gore
Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation Portable

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KONAMI
www.konami.com

Rayman Raving Rabbids 2

Master Cheese

words Dave Halverson

Those nutty designers at Ubisoft have been breeding mini-games like Rabbids again. Suffice it to say that there will be ample supply in RR2 and if the sampling that I messed with is any indication—even better than the originals. But that's not what I want to talk about. I'm so fixated on one aspect of RR2 that I wouldn't care if there were any mini-games at all and RR is actually the first assemblage of time wasters I've ever given a squat about. It's the new FPS engine that has my tail wagging. The mad scientists at Montpellier have integrated Rabbids into a full-frame silky smooth FMV FPS; it's like those old Sega CD games only in real-time high resolution with gorgeous 3D critters seamlessly woven into the landscape! My vote is for an entire game of this. Just add massive bosses and an array of boom sticks and you've got yourself the next FPS sensation. Rabbid foots all around!

Rayman Raving Rabbids 2	
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Ubisoft Montpellier
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	November 15

Army of Two

War is better in pairs

words Brady Fechter

Army of Two is about teamwork, and the first major decision that must be made involves which character to assume. Will it be the scar-blemished grizzle of Rios, or the cool good looks of model-parted, thick-haired Salem? In the end it probably won't matter too much when you're staring down the barrel of a gun.

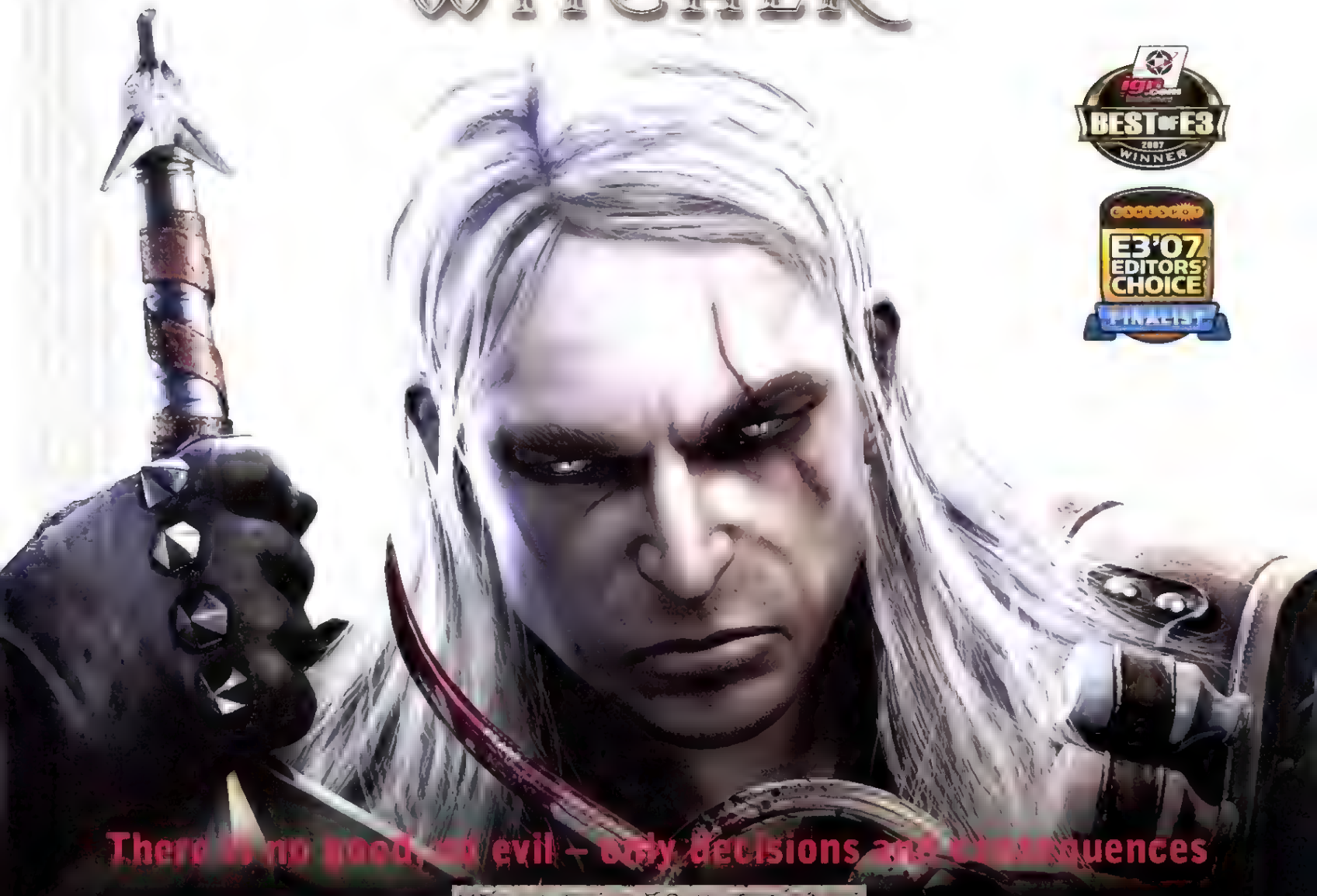
Nothing too out of the ordinary here once that battle ensues in terms of basic third person combat fee. Gears of War gets a nod when you go into cover fire, and even a nice familiar grenade arc path lights up to guide the boom right where you want it. The big hook here is the AI or human-guided cooperative play, which sets up scenes like spraying fire while back-to-back and eyeing targets while simultaneously sniping. If your buddy goes down, he can fire off rounds at the enemy while you drag him to safety; if the tampon isn't enough to stave a wound and CPR is needed to resuscitate, a brief context-sensitive sequence is in order: "That's enough, don't need mouth to mouth..."

Obviously cover fire is a must in a co-op tactical, which brings us to the "agro" meter. Blasting away at an enemy draws their ire to the source of the gunfire, which lights up the agro meter and gives your buddy time to make decisions while the heat is somewhere else. The bigger the gun the better, of course, and you can trade off firepower, followed up by "hit me bro" and a good solid smack with The Rock.

C'mon bro; you take her for awhile.

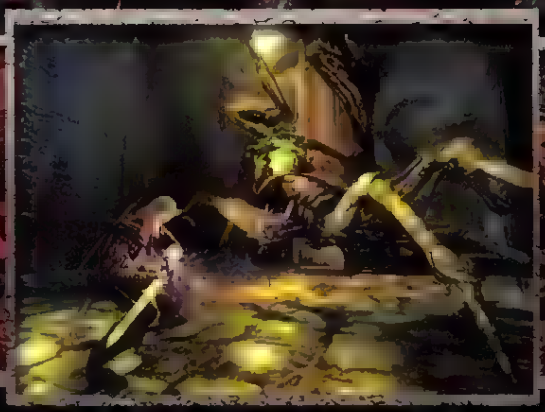
Army of Two	
System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	EA Montreal
Publisher	EA
Available	November

THE WITCHER



There is no good and evil – only decisions and consequences

Action-heavy, real-time combat system with advanced motion-captured swordplay



Over 250 game-changing skills and abilities including advanced alchemy, multiple fighting styles and powerful magics

Mature fantasy storyline with over 80 hours of non-linear roleplaying

MATURE 17+

M

Blood and Gore
Partial Nudity
Strong Language
Strong Sexual Content
Violence

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

Available Fall 2007

www.thewitcher.com

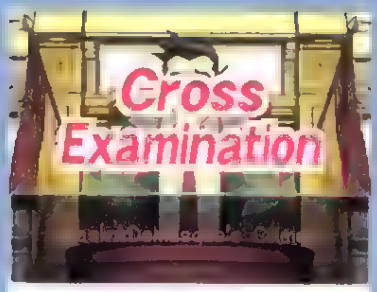
CDPROJEKT

Powered by BioWare aurora engine

ATARI

Disorder in the court...

Interview



Ah-ha! Proof that Guile wears too much hair gel!

Interview

play: How, exactly, does Harvey Birdman differ from Capcom's other legal-themed game?
Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law borrows many elements from Phoenix Wright, but it's more of a series of interactive episodes, complete with the closing credits for each one. The recipe is simple. Take the fully animated cut scenes with top quality voice talent and mix it with the base gameplay of Phoenix Wright. What you have is a movie's worth of content from one of Cartoon Network's most popular Adult Swim cartoons highlighting a lawyer adventure game. It's a match made in bliss.

Some early screen shots for Birdman reveal an obscure cast of bit-players: Secret Squirrel, Yakky Doodle, etc. Tell us about all the has-beens, never-wases, and occasional stars Birdman will have to interact with.
Secret Squirrel, Magilla Gorilla, Yakky Doodle, Dum Dum, Pixie and Dixie, Deadly Duplicator, Blue Falcon, and Inch High Private Eye. Of course, the classic favorites: Peanut, Reducto, Vulturo, Peter Potamus, Birdgirl, Mentok, Mightor, Phil, Avenger, X the Eliminator, but not THE BEAR. (I satisfy myself by lying.)

Walk us through a sample case for Birdman...
Case 2, Cleaning Crew, starts off with the depiction of the crime—an obvious night-time robbery. Harvey arrives at his office the next morning and finds that all of his furniture and possessions were stolen—burgled! Plundered. Birdgirl finds three suspects, and the player must collect the appropriate evidence to link two of the three possible perpetrators to the crime. In classic Harvey ineptitude, he goes to trial to prosecute both Secret Squirrel and Magilla Gorilla, but he doesn't know which of the two actually committed the crime. Unfortunately for Harvey, Mentok appoints Birdman to defend the two (because he IS a defense attorney, after all.) So the player must find a way to prove that neither Magilla nor Secret Squirrel were in fact the burglars.

No great lawyer is worth a lick of salt without noted opposition. Who serves as the prosecution in Harvey Birdman? And omit no detail in describing his fierce legal style.
Harvey battles wits with a host of prosecutors. Case one features the [*mumbles, as Vulturo does*] distinguished and fleor chot Vulturo blemnsag. Case two, the sleezy, slick-talking Freezoid. Case three, Freezoid again, but then a new guest prosecutor comes on the scene, a burly prisoner who has no name, but a deep voice and a no-nonsense attitude. Case four, Harvey Birdman II—the Garth-like (from Knight Rider) bearded version of our own Harvey Birdman turns out to be way more of a match than the original Harvey would ever be! And in a very weird twist, the original Harvey Birdman even serves as Harvey Birdman's prosecutor—sort of. Ahem. Case five, the triumvirate of evil, the terrible trio, Harvey's worst possible nightmare... Oh, I just can't say it. You'll just have to play to find out. I'm omitting details. My choice.

What's the one, crucial piece of evidence in the case for Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law that we're missing? You know, the one that will blow the lid off of this hermetically sealed and oversized can of lies?
Back off. There's nothing oversized here. I have nothing further to say about our secrets. Our little, itsy bitsy secrets. Seems to me you've got this case cracked, anyway. The truth is out. Everyone's got it. No surprises here. It's obvious. What you see is what you get. I'm just not telling.

Do you have anything to add? Or is there anything we missed?
People who play games in a party situation can sit around and watch this game, shouting out answers and playing the "I think" drinking game. After the script was written, we realized that Harvey often said the phrase following a confident statement. It's perfect for a drinking game. So play it and drink. Just in case the ESRB is reading, please drink Kool-Aid. Oh, in case the makers of Kool-Aid are reading, I didn't get their blessing to talk about their product in a party-going environment. I meant... uh, Coffee. But be careful, because prolonged exposure to a TV screen can cause epileptic seizures in lab coats.

Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law is a simple formula that works. It appeals to a wide audience: 1) Fans of the show 2) Fans of Phoenix Wright 3) The mass market 4) The adventure gaming market 5) Fans of comedy. It's really got something for each group.

"...he gave up trial to prosecute both Secret Squirrel and Magilla Gorilla, but he doesn't know which of the two actually committed the crime."

CLIVE BARKER'S

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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language

XBOX 360 LIVE

Games for Windows

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LEAD A STRIKE TEAM TRAINED IN OCCULT WARFARE

ALL-ACTION FPS COMBINED WITH THE DARKEST HORROR

SWITCH BETWEEN, CONTROL, AND PLAY ALL SIX SQUAD MEMBERS, EACH WITH UNIQUE ABILITES

A FIERCELY ORIGINAL, HIGH DEF REALM OF EVIL FROM CLIVE BARKER

PLAYSTATION 3

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Reviews

Dave Halverson

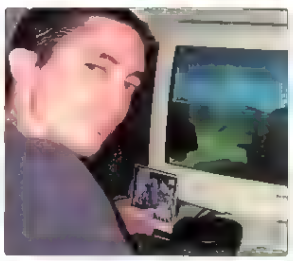
Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood, E. Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night, leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

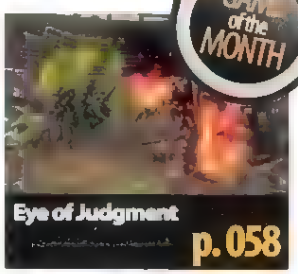
Greg Orlando

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: if the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Eye of Judgment

p. 058

The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tataka: No Banka: Elegy For Battle," but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting

Casey Loe

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Julia Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell

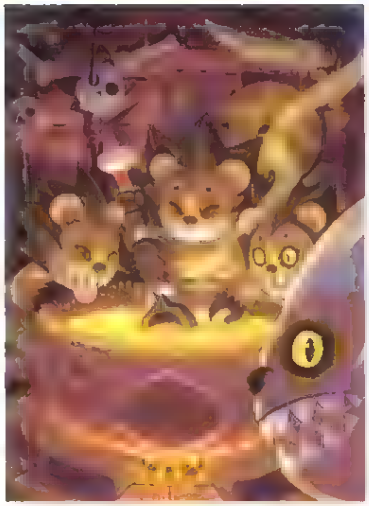
Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter II and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heather's been playing since Aztec Adventure and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

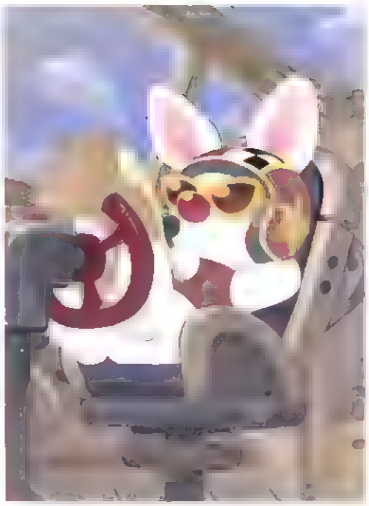
Mike Hobbs

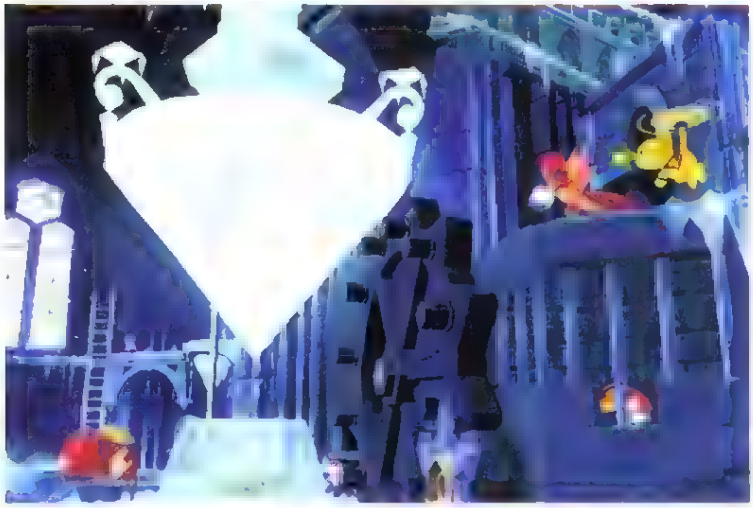
A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Zack and Wiki

Quest for Barboros' Treasure







Zack and Wiki: Quest for Barboros' Treasure stars Zack, a treasure hunter, and Wiki, a monkey (I think) whose tail serves as a helicopter blade. Zack likes chocolate, so much so that he'll bust out a bar in victory celebration and even chomp down on the delicious treat while falling from the sky in a giant explosion. The pair are inseparable friends, and they make new friends during their adventure, including the snot-nosed Dimmy and the crash-helmet wearing (rabbit?) Johnny Style.

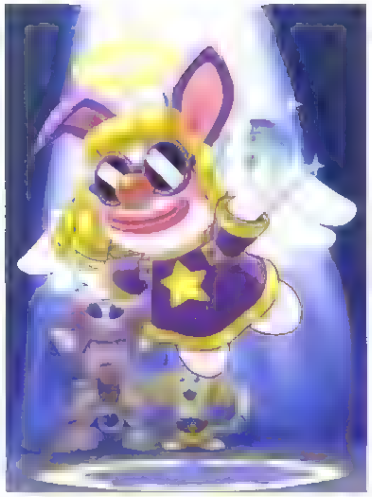
The game spins a considerable amount of extra offbeat color into its familiar Japanese quirkiness, almost bordering on the bizarre at times. You have to have the open mind for this type of universe of characters and imagery, and somehow it all does make sense calling the Wii home. And only on the Wii could a game like Zack and Wiki make any sense at all, because it's the motion-sensing controls that ultimately make the experience fly.

You could tag the game as somewhat of an adventure of sorts as it tracks the lighthearted story and characters through flavorful cut scenes and island hopping locales that add extra dimension to the puzzle design. The central mission is to collect scattered body parts of the pirate Barboros, who it is promised will deliver the mother-load treasure in reward. Varying in size and complexity, each stage begins as Zack and Wiki survey the land, coming to grips with a variety of obstacles and challenges that lie before you. The pair is guided along the path by pointing to a destination, and ultimately you're wanting to figure out how to grab a key and then bypass the remaining death traps to unlock the treasure before tackling the next stage. Wiki provides help with his transformative touch, responding to Zack's bell as you vigorously shake the Wiimote to turn indigenous creatures and objects into invaluable items. Even when the most rudimentary tasks are needed outside of the denser problem solving, it's always fun simply manipulating with the Wiimote: place a statue on a sensor, crank a key in a door lock, drop a bomb in the water.

Consider an earlier stage: natives are circling a burning alter below the treasure. You notice a poisonous mushroom and a cook stirring soup, which the natives flock to after intermittently pausing to pray. A snake is coiled at the bottom of a winding chasm and a gondola ride separates platforms that obviously need reached to complete the puzzle. What to do, what to do?

Sometimes there's a feeling of going through the motions more than tackling a brain teaser, but the best laid stages are big fun to unravel. There's an element of threat you will die, and maybe often until getting a feel for the area—which lends the game some risk-reward factor. Money earned can be used to purchase advice from the loungy Oracle if you're stuck, miss the mark at the tail end of a long stage and you'll be grateful you had a proper stock of golden tickets to buy your way out of starting way back at the beginning.

Be equally grateful that a game like Zack and Wiki: Quest for Barboros' Treasure exists as a unique alternative amongst the holiday release list.

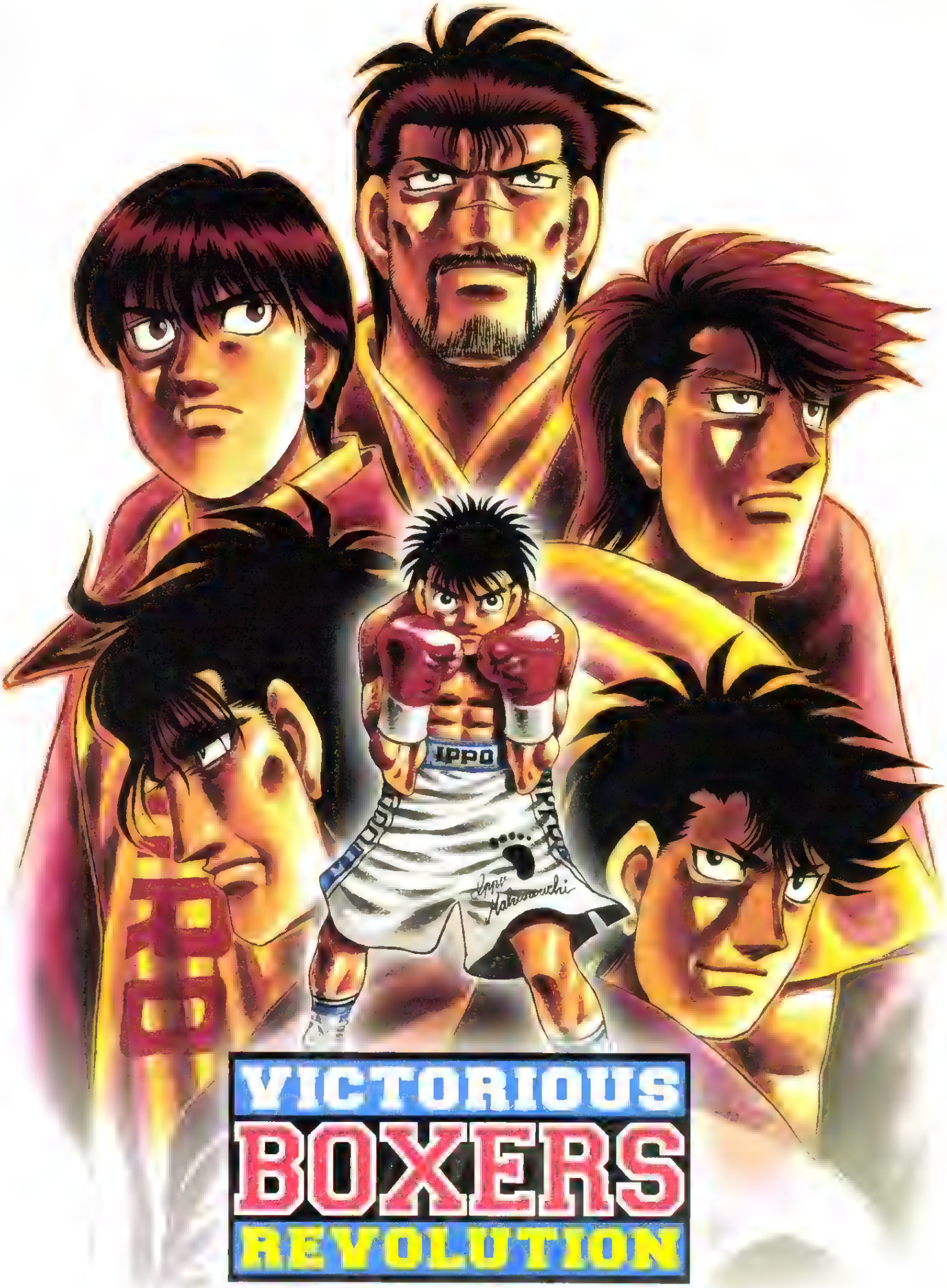


Zack and Wiki: Quest for Barboros' Treasure — score

Unique puzzle-solving that feels right on the Wii

Mechanical at times, quirkiness doesn't always fly

System(s)	Wii
Developer	[illegible]
Publisher	[illegible]
Online/Multi	[illegible]
ESRB Rating	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]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your path to victory contains many obstacles

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TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Cartoon Violence

XSEED GAMES

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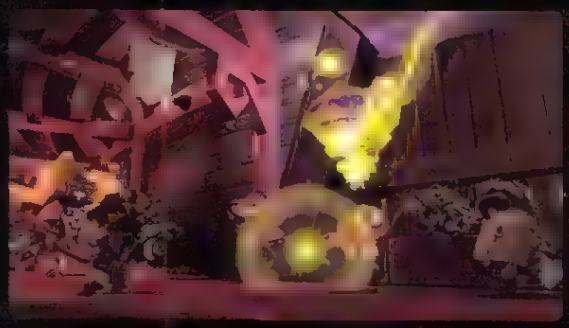
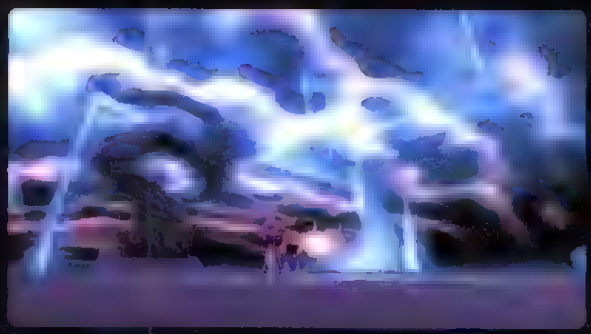
Wii™





The Legend of Spyro
The Eternal Night

"What Insomniac began Krome have now made completely their own..."

words Dave Halverson

Spyro must be the luckiest dragon in history. Not only did he survive the great platforming cataclysm, but he managed to resurface with two A-list thespians in tow and Australia's hottest developer.

In this sequel to A New Beginning... with Cynder defeated, Gaul the Ape King steps in to resurrect the Dark Master. Once again in the able hands of Krome—the Aussie studio that rode in on Ty the Tasmanian Tiger and have been on a non-stop roll ever since—this is high adventure wonderfully told in a game that personifies everything that is grand about 3D platforming. With The Eternal Night, Spyro now takes center stage as the poster child for platforming kind, in a quest that offers non-stop diversity and play mechanics in a game of skill and awe—a rare beam of light for those of us who still consider this the to be king of all genres...well, us and 12 year old boys.

Carrying over from A New Beginning, Spyro begins the game with limited abilities, unlocking elemental powers along the way which can be augmented action-RPG-style. The slowing of time is also woven into the framework along with the obligatory special attacks and Spyro's trademark gliding. With each elemental power (displayed by gauges that can be replenished by colored crystals strategically strewn throughout each area), new play mechanics and strategies mount, creating a flow that never stales. From the way Spyro negotiates the game's ever-budding obstacles to the way he deals with Gaul's relentless minions, Krome keep us on our tippy toes for the duration.

Krome have also seen fit to strip Spyro games of anything resembling "cute." The tone here is set on foreboding (you want the soundtrack? you can't handle the soundtrack!) the story is grandiose, and the gameplay is downright treacherous. The combat requires skillful deployment of the game's many techniques; the platforming is a timing jumper's wet dream, and the bosses...just bring your best. This is also the kind of game that makes you fall in love with the Wiimote and Nunchuck all over again. The PS2 version is well done as usual but the game truly shines on Wii. What Insomniac began Krome have now made completely their own, taking Spyro from a lighthearted adventure to a hardcore dark platformer. May it fly forever.

The Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night score

System(s)	[illegible]
Developer	[illegible]
Publisher	[illegible]
Online/Multi	No
Available	[illegible]
ESRB Rating	E

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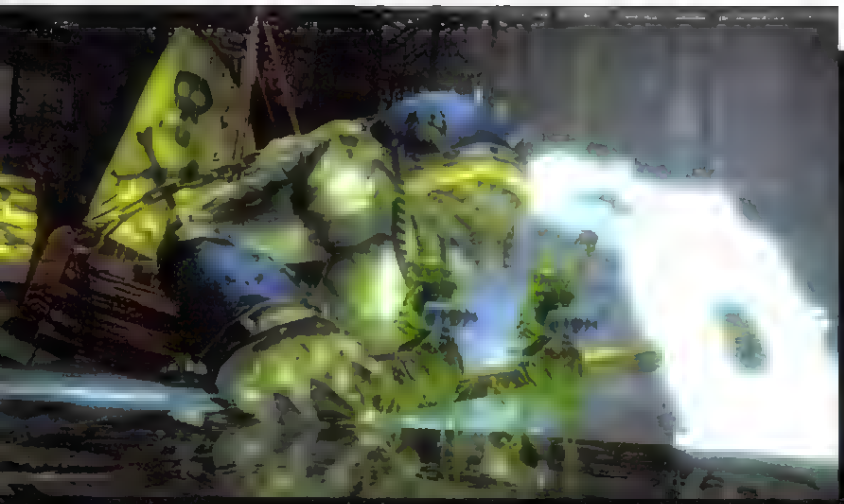
eye judged

Beauty is in the Eye...

words Dave Halverson

As the world's first virtual card battle Eye of Judgment is nearly flawless in its execution—as close to perfection as can possibly be achieved. As addictive and endlessly fun a game it is, however, there's more going on here, reaching beyond recent strides in online entertainment. Like many an online game it can be played over a network but that's just the beginning of what's destined to become the first game with an ongoing retail component. Prior to Eye I never found myself thinking about accentuating my game experience via something I could go out and buy. Having gone the first 30 days with a starter deck watching the computer brandish character cards I didn't possess, I found myself counting the days until I could wield them, wondering how much Mana they might be able to cast, or what their attack, defense and attack range might be. This is not normal thinking. All of a sudden I'm obsessing over a deck of strategy cards? Have I entered true Geekdom? Apparently so. Receiving the actual starter deck for the retail game I tore the wrapper off and began shuffling madly: "Oooh, Elven Berserker Maidens! Venom Assassins! Stone Wing Dwarf! The Biolith Battle Chariot! Sciondar the Fire God, and TAURUS MONOLITH!!! I couldn't wait to place them onto the battle mat and watch the sparks fly. "If only I had a White Cubic or Parmetic Holy Feast!" Ahhh! What have I become? Thinking it couldn't get any better, a few days later the screens on this spread came in (all of which feature never-before-seen characters)... "There are more!!??" And then I realized: There will always be more! Suffice it to say the knee-high gothic table I bought for my EoJ setup is now a permanent fixture under my wall-mounted flatty. Now all I need is a cloak. The first thing anyone asks when they see it..."What's that?" Oh, here, let me show you... Muahahaha, another PS3 sold!!

I never imagined that a deck of cards could harness such fandom (I've always scratched my head over crazes like Yu-Gi-Oh! and the like). It's the transition from imaginary to virtual that grabs you by the cajones. Beyond the visual satisfaction, the game, which is great to begin with, only gets better over time. The more you learn



about your characters and their unique attributes the more astute you become. "I wonder if this Triceptaur Behemoth will survive on a water field…" Now I understand how people end up shriveled and alone playing Warcraft…well, sort of. The beauty about Eye is that your average game clocks in at 30 minutes; an hour tops. And while you're not playing you don't have to worry about the unemployed stock broker leveling up to kill you. With nine years left in the PS3's lifespan (unless it grows a mind of its own and pulls a Roy Batty on us "…I want more life fu&%$r!") I can only imagine what my EoJ collection will look like in 2016 as I wait for my PS4. EoJ 2 better be a launch title, or else!!

If I give another 10 this year Nick will fly in and spike my Sugar Free Bawls so I'll knock off a .5 for the occasional Eye malfunction in dimly lit rooms and size of the playfield. Satisfied? I plan on going into hiding after the Ratchet & Clank review.

Eye of Judgment

score

Thoroughly engaging and everlasting geek warfare
Awesome soundtrack

Fine. Requires space and light; needs to be set up
Camera reads can be dodgy on occasion

System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	SCE
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	vs. Player online
Available	October
ESRB Rating	T

CONAN

Brady Fiechter

[illegible] talk b[illegible] [illegible]ing [illegible] [illegible]sed [illegible] [illegible] in [illegible] of War, and there's [illegible] that the upcom[illegible] Mass Effect will [illegible] similar flavor, [illegible] [illegible]-on-girl.

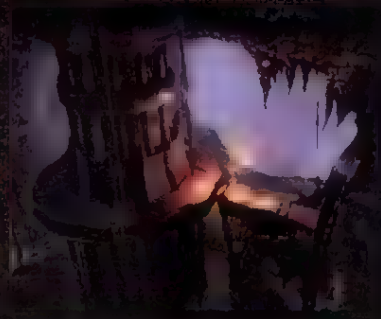
Not to be outdone [illegible] capable action-adventure [illegible] Conan, which features more [illegible] breasts than the [illegible] of your [illegible] web site. Tied up and in [illegible] of rescuing several t[illegible] and, of course, generously endowed women are scattered throughout the levels. Upon their release, you will hear such remarks as "where are my clothes?" and [illegible] your love" as they give you a little stripper-like shimmy. It's good to see the medium pushing boundaries.

I am told that the comics by Robert E. Howard, unread by myself, were completely over-the-top, so I leave the irony of this possible homage to the masses. Go discuss amongst yourselves.

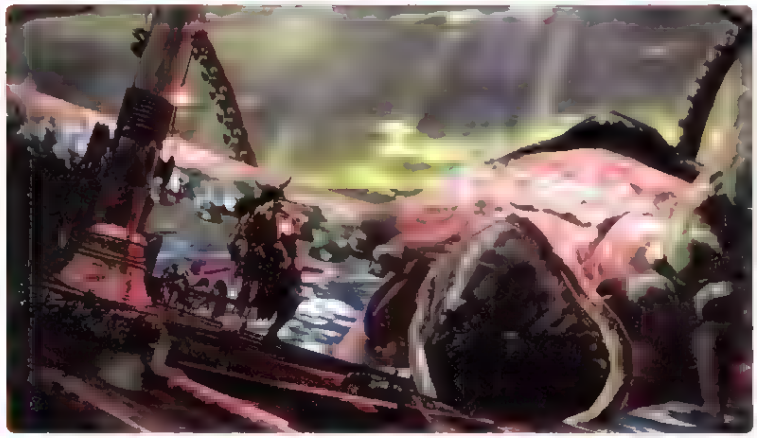
Conan—not to be confused with

"Upon their release, you will hear such remarks as 'where are my clothes?' and 'crush me with your love.'"

"Severed limbs and decapitated heads are left behind in a sea of blood..."



Hope he's an organ donor.



I believe that is known as "incentive."

the MMORPG Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures has certainly earned its M rating, but that distinction rests almost entirely on the gore factor. Severed limbs and decapitated heads are left behind in a sea of blood, rolling around nicely in the way of Conan's step. The enemy is ripped apart, dissected, eviscerated and burned alive, but it's not so outrageously done that it doesn't feel proper and appealing within the universe. The game succeeds here because the brutality is satisfying, the moves coming off with enough impact to make you feel connected to the character. Conan is a barbarian, and this is felt at its best when you parry a strike, finishing off with a death move in a slow-motion transition.

There are cinematic moments brushed into the combat very well, which holds the game up when the foundation of the combat begins to crack. There's a huge amount of moves to master, and button mashing won't get the job done efficiently, but you can't help but feel the monotony set in on some of the more drawn out levels. The boss battles, dramatic and well conceived for the most part, are often split into parts and can take several minutes to complete. Within these climactic confrontations and throughout the entire scope of the game, button-timing sequences are sprinkled in to shift focus to the presentation trimmings of the game. Sometimes this works in the game's favor, sometimes it feels unnecessary. I know not everyone cares for the increasing trend of quick-time events in a game, but I definitely like the urgency and visual flash afforded by this design choice. It only really breaks down in Conan when the mechanic leads to the dull tasks like knocking over one too many pillars, the game relies on an overabundance of rudimentary objectives that yield lackluster rewards.

If you must compare Conan to God of War—and will you ever—you'll find less to like in the shadow of Sony's modern classic. Conan shares a lot with a game that demands to be pillaged for inspiration, and it will draw more criticism than it deserves on its own. It looks good but not great, feels good but not great, has some very cool moments before running into duller moments right around the corner. Not every game can be high level, leaving Conan to fill a spot in a genre that needs more company.

Conan — score

Satisfies beyond the button mashing, satisfying violence and [illegible] excellent boss encounters

Some levels drag on in inconsistency, lacks contrast and doesn't fully realize some great idea

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Developer	Nihilistic
Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	NA
Available	October
ESRB Rating	M

BLEACH
Shattered Blade

Heather Campbe

Bleach: Shattered Blade is a great casual fighting game. The control is top-notch (which on a Wii fighter should mean a congratulatory Central Park parade), the 32 strong character roster is awesome (and compelling if you're a fan of the anime series), and the dub is, believe it or not, actually good.

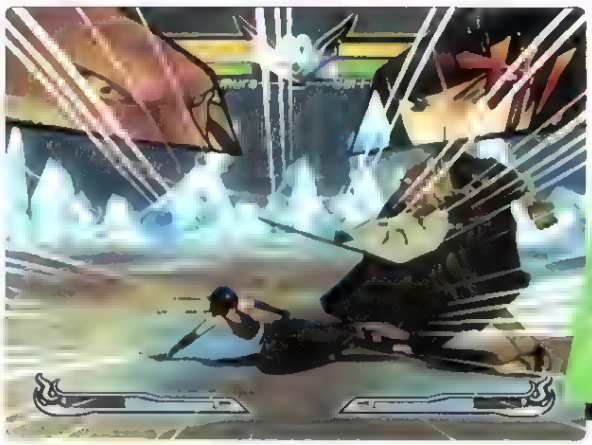
Further more—on a stylistic note—the game uses cel-shading with pencil-scratched shadows for an overall manga effect that even looks good on an HDTV. Yeah, everything is here for a well-rounded experience. Like Naruto, Bleach has seen a lot of licensed titles, but due to the *control*, Shattered Blade actually stands out. Wii games are best when you're shooting with or furiously swinging the Wiimote. Bleach appeals to the latter.

The combos in this game are absurd and gratifying, the branching story is nice enough. There's something clicky in this game, and if you've got friends who like Bleach as much as you, then it's going to make for a splendid experience. It's not a deep enough game for fighter fans, but it is a comfortable fit for anime fans. Or Wii owners who just want to see how games *should* use the controller.

Bleach: Shattered Blade — Score

+	Glorious fighting control for a Wii game
−	Bleach fans will be much happier than regular gamers

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Polygon Magic
Publisher	Sega
Available	October
ESRB Rating	Teen



Ace Combat 6
Fires of Liberation

War of the worlds

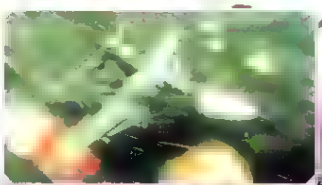
words Brady Fiechter

I've never heard of an F-15 E Strike Eagle, but if I had a love for the design of multi million-dollar aircraft so elegantly displayed in Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation, I can only imagine enjoying the game that much more. What I do love is a game that exhibits a fine craft in all its efforts, and this is a good one.

Those awesomely displayed planes are just a part of the superb and greatly enhanced presentation Ace Combat 6 brings to the series. There are times—the weather-enhanced missions are spectacular—when the game operates as one of the richest visual achievements in games. With the additional information of widescreen presentation, the enveloping sense of scale and endless pollution of action in the skies is a new sensation that never could have been captured before. When the mission is at its most perilous, the complex weave of smoke and exhaust and explosions is quite the sight—and all the while, you're navigating this tremendously convincing space, adding to the exciting tapestry of war. Sure, the view on the ground can break the illusion and show the cracks in the technology, but the tension of speed and the rush of near misses make up for the loss.

I like that Ace Combat 6 is subtle and more interested in grandeur than easy, propulsive thrills. The music is full and softly orchestrated, and there is a bleak, stark beauty to the cutscenes that really works in its earnest depiction of multiple points of view from both sides of the conflict.

An organic, unorthodox tone connects the presentation with the gameplay, which rewards patience and finesse. Even though the option to break off and complete multiple missions in the order you choose doesn't do much substantially to alter the gameplay, the longer stay in the air to complete the entire objective is welcome. To me, the most satisfying addition to the foundation of the game is the ability to direct your allies to focus fire in group attacks. It's a very cool sight to see your order for a massive strike play out as the sky lights up in dazzling weapons fire. Ace Combat 6 is this venerable series at its best.



Just a sampling of the wide variety of awesome aircraft.

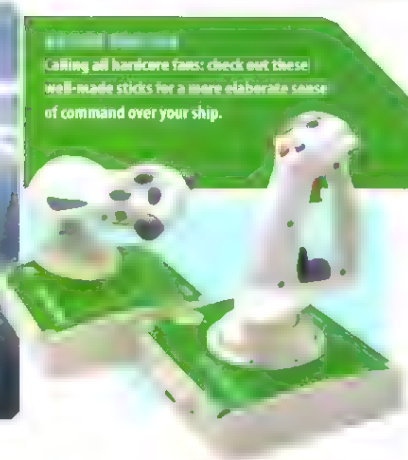
"Ace Combat 6 is this venerable series at its best."

Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation — SCORE

[illegible]

[illegible]

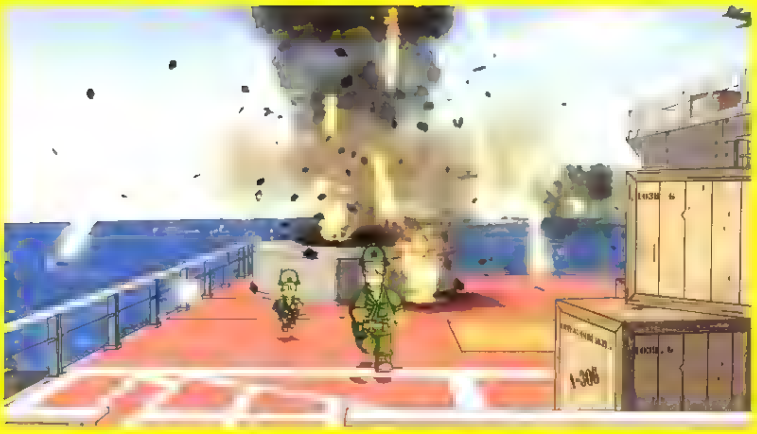
System(s)	[illegible]
Developer	[illegible] Bandai
Publisher	[illegible] Bandai
Online/Multi	[illegible]
Available	October
ESRB Rating	[illegible]



Calling all hardcore fans: check out these well-made sticks for a more elaborate sense of command over your ship.

The Simpsons

words Greg Orlando



The Simpsons game is nothing if not pragmatic. At one point, young rapscall on Bart Simpson discovers a manual for what appears to be a video game based on his family. As he reads through the list of playable characters, he comes across his sister Lisa's name.

"Lisa?" he wonders aloud. "Who'd want to play her?"

Nothing is sacred here. The Simpsons, purveyors of the funny, have long been video game whipping boys. Now, under Electronic Arts' direction, they're striking back. The platformer-cum-beat-'em-up parodies such sacred cows as Grand Theft Auto, Pokémon, EverQuest, and even Electronic Arts' own Medal of Honor franchise. Better still, the Xbox 360 version of The Simpsons rewards players with a five-point achievement for pressing the start button to begin a game. When one of the Simpsons trods across some of video gaming's most hallowed—or perhaps overworked—ground, the rotund Comic Book Guy appears on screen to point out the cliché. "Ah, the crate," he'll muse. "As seen in everything." Collecting all 31 video game clichés earns, guess what? A prize.

Cell-shaded and largely gorgeous, The Simpsons game looks like an episode of the animated TV show brought to life. It's also goofily whip-smart, paying homage to the days when Bart and company were truly the best thing on television.

Electronic Arts has a lot of fertile ground to plow here. At one point, Lisa and Marge team up to purge the world of Grand Theft Itchy (the violentest video game ever) of all its debauchery. Later, Homer and Lisa enter a Japanese-themed world where uberneird Milhouse Van Houten does a really good imitation of the king from Katamari Damacy. It's here the game deftly detours, briefly, to drop the Simpsons into a turn-based combat game straight out of Pokémon, and finally has them rescue the classic, English-bleating one-off character Mr. Sparkle ("Join me or die! Can you do any less?")

Ultimately, though, The Simpsons lives and dies on the strength of its gameplay and here it doesn't particularly shine. Aside from a litany of standard, almost forced, jump-punch-kick challenges, an overactive camera that provides for dizzying flickers and unworkable views dominates the game. In some stages, say, where Homer is wildly dashing around as a gigantic doughball, the camera goes psycho—almost headache-inducingly so.

The game also sees fit to imbue the Simpsons each with a superpower of sorts, and this, too, is relatively perplexing. Okay, so players can swallow the idea Lisa would transform, now and again, into the superheroine Clobber Girl. But the Hand of Buddha superpower, in which Lisa can meditate to control a giant, disembodied hand in order to lift objects and solve puzzles is the video game equivalent of Poochie the Rockin' Dog. And that certainly isn't crantastic. Not by any means.

"The Hand of Buddha superpower, in which Lisa can meditate to control a giant, disembodied hand in order to lift objects and solve puzzles is the video game equivalent of Poochie the Rockin' Dog. And that certainly isn't crantastic."

The Simpsons score

Funny; beautiful; lots of great characters and good writing

– Platforming is uninspired; Camera is sometimes problematic; Who'd want to play Lisa?

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PS2, Wii
Developer	[illegible]
Publisher	EA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	October 30

Next time maybe he'll pay the check.

Clive Barker's

Jericho

Don't let the flies take you...

words Mike Griffin

Too bad we didn't have any hardcore R-rated military sci-fi action films at the box-office this summer. You know the kind: explosive, blood-splattering, creature feature goodness, saturated in bullets and technology—the ilk of Aliens, Predators, and Underworlds. Thanks to the power of next-gen gaming and Clive Barker's vast imagination, you can get your horror sci-fi action fix through a powerful first-person shooter. Jericho is a fast-paced, hard-talkin' tactical squad shooter with an intense and highly scripted campaign through the many epochs of a doomed ancient city.

Jericho's top-notch script and voice-acting locks you into the narrative of Al-Khali and the city's history of banishment from the graces of God. Spoken dialogue is absolutely M-rated stuff, with irreverent banter and F-bombs delivered left and right—just like you'd expect from a hardened military squad like Jericho. These characters enjoy

> "...an intense and highly scripted campaign through the many epochs of a doomed ancient city."

superb modeling and texturing, gifted with deeply normal-mapped uniforms and devices, rustling hair, bouncy breasts and ultra-detailed faces. Great VO and smartly timed disclosure of character lore (like Cole's fragile mental history and Delgado's pact with a fire demon) make these protagonists unique and memorable. Mercury Steam and Barker have conceived a fine plot and a Hollywood-worthy squad of modern-day warrior mages.

Jericho eases you into its spiritual squad concept, where the main character's entity can hop around between six other squad members. The process, however, can be disorienting and difficult at times. Instead of harping about the problems, I'm going to tell you how to avoid them. Keep your squad on Hold mode in open areas as often as possible. They have a tendency to bunch-up in narrow spots and choke points, and Jericho

[illegible]

enemies are fearless and obsessive about using splash-damage weapons (rockets, flamethrowers, self-destruct) at close range. It's far too easy to plunge into a death loop where your clustered squad dies, revives and immediately gets mashed again by point-blank splash damage. Three miraculous little words for you: Cole's Proximity Grenades. Hang back and pepper the battlefield with those bad boys, then use Black to snipe around corners. Drop some snaring blood magic with Church, and let Delgado wade in and finish up with his mini-gun and flame shield. If you don't respect the battlefield and keep a little space between your squaddies, you'll experience some death looping frustration and harsh restarts. To its ultimate credit, Jericho's tight FPS action and focused level design means you'll enjoy the fruits of your tactical discretion.

It's easy to recommend Jericho. The game looks and sounds terrific (though later levels suffer a few grating faux-symphonic tunes), and it has a cool popcorn-movie-with-a-brain story and superb voice work. I would've enjoyed more variety in the enemy fodder, but what's available is certainly creepy and intense. Clive Barker should develop more games.

Clive Barker's Jericho score

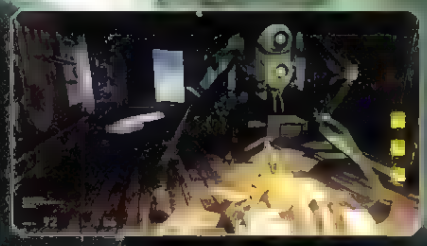
[illegible]

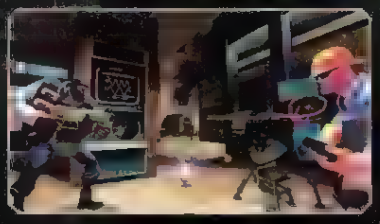
System(s)	[illegible]
Developer	Mercury Steam
Publisher	[illegible]
Online/Multi	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]
ESRB Rating	[illegible]

Half-Life 2 The Orange Box

Welcome to City 17. It's safer here.

words Brady Fiechter





There's a sequence mid-game in Half-Life 2, where MIT-graduate/silent-hero/man-on-the-run-badass Gordon Freeman exits his flimsy buggy to scale the trusses of a massive bridge that towers over the ocean below. Many great moments have come before this, and many are to follow, but it is in this journey to find a switch and open a gate that I felt something I've never quite experienced in a game: a real sense of persistent vertigo.

I'm blown away by this scene, from its setup to visual presence to bold originality to frustrating and exciting conclusion. But it's not the fear of heights Half-Life 2 brings to the table that defines its unparalleled accomplishments. Nearly every corner of its incredibly realized world is populated with some grand stroke of design that I don't think any game has touched on since—or at least has nailed with such confidence and effortless instinct. All the moments I found myself involved on a genuinely epic, film-like scale, all the moments I was given something I've always wished for in a game, I can see why the lucky ones on PC were emphatic enough to herald Half-Life 2 as one of the greats. Never mind that it's so massive in scope that there's so much room for difficult mistakes, inconsistencies and obvious sacrifices. Someone will come along sooner than later and make a better Half-Life, but for now, there's something awesome and respectable to behold here.

> "Much has already been said about the game's marvelous use of physics, the integration of logical puzzles and inventive level interaction."

Much has already been said about the game's marvelous use of physics, the integration of logical puzzles and inventive level interaction. In purely technical terms, the model is impressive for sure, and on a more abstract level, developer Valve demonstrates a keen understanding on how to use those physics for important immersion; the gravity gun, of course, is the cornerstone to the tactile magic. For a game that's around the three year mark, you'd never know it: visually and mechanically,

Half-Life 2 stands tall with the best of this year, and when you mix in Episodes One and Two the entire package is spectacularly satisfying and certainly unattainable by any other first-person shooter this year in size and sustained quality for the single-player.

Perhaps less praised and a big part of the subtle effect that elevates Half-Life 2 is the bond that's continually built with the lovely Alyx Vance. Valve avoids the sexual caricature that marks and diminishes so many games, and they bless her with an emotional core that is expressed more through circumstance and presence than strings of dialogue; there is power here that only a video game can tap into. (Also note how well the mechanical Dog is given life and a real buddy quality.) It's a shame, though, when Alyx is diminished to vomiting insipid one-liners throughout Episode 1. Apparently Valve got overly inspired by the need for the chatty template, and lost their quietly powerful way from where they began.

We live in the real world where Big Brother looms as big as ever. In some direct and indirect ways, there's a part of Half-Life 2 that breeds fear and political consequence within its alien apocalypse. There are many reasons to praise Half-Life 2 that reach well beyond the surface of its gameplay and into the expression of its complete world of fantasy. In all the areas I imagined room for improvement and wanted even more, I also saw why I believe in video games.

Half-Life 2: The Orange Box — Score

System(s)	
Developer	
Publisher	
Online/Multi	
Available	
ESRB Rating	

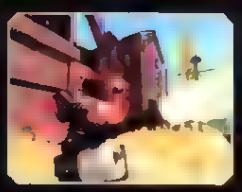
Nothing says high-concept sci-fi like Half-Life 2.

Portal

This cooly sci-fi puzzle game integrates the idea of a gun becoming a tool to open up rifts in space; hence, Portal. Blast a hole in strategic areas in the room, jump in and fall through to the other side to set up a path toward the exit, or establish traps to dispose of threats. The mind is taxed hard and often in this fantastic addition to the Orange Box.

Team Fortress 2

How is this long awaited multiplayer action game possibly included in this package? Team Fortress 2 contains too much under the hood for me to comment properly on given my limited play with a small team of players, but I will say the Thief rocks; there was something devilishly satisfying stalking the other team while cloaked, launching a surprise attack with the quick slash of my knife. And disguising as the enemy brought plenty of delicious curses from the opponent. One instantly appreciated note: the bright, clean, easily distinguishable landscapes maintained clear focus on the action.



CRASH of the TITANS

May the best mask win

words Dave Halverson

He's a Bandicoot…on a pale monster he rides. He's wanted (wanted) dead or alive…

While you attempt to wipe that old [illegible] diddle out of your [illegible] spin you a yarn [illegible] orange bandicoot with [illegible] chowing [illegible] Crash Bandicoot. Originally [illegible] back in the heyday of [illegible] Naughty Dog on the map and became the most internationally [illegible] US- [illegible] Crash so when they [illegible] and moved to Beverly [illegible]), poor Crash had to wave [illegible] to the only family he ever knew. [illegible] a rough road for Crash ever since. [illegible] Naughty Dog went on to groom their new stars, Jak and Daxter, Crash was bounced around like the skinny orange cash cow he had become, starring in a slew of handheld and console wannabes, some good and some not so good, until finally landing a new home at Radical Entertainment, which is where our story begins.

For their first game as Crash's official keepers Radical Entertainment did something very wise…bought a big-ass mallet and shattered the traditional Crash mold, redesigning Crash and the game from the ground up. They've substantially increased his move set

"Jacking beasts isn't merely a simple means of progression; it's a discipline unto itself, carefully orchestrated to reap maximum rewards."

Sup Neo C.? Er—we need to talk...

through an evolutionary cycle as the plot thickens and given him the uncanny ability to jack indigenous wildlife throughout his quest to free sister Cocoa and stop Nina Cortex (that's right, Neo's out, Nina's in—talk to the mask) and Uka Uka from building their evil Mojo army.

As beautiful as the game looks and as brilliant the level design—this is the Crash game to beat all Crash games—the gameplay really takes center stage. Jacking beasts isn't merely a simple means of progression, it's a discipline unto itself, carefully orchestrated to reap maximum rewards. There's an easy way to jack every creature (it's finding it that's rough) and then once in the saddle it becomes one big string of beast-on-beast action, simultaneously killing one before jacking another—turning beast on beast until only yours remains to open the way ahead. This single play mechanic plays out brilliantly throughout the game yet it's only the tip of the iceberg. Crash now grapples, kicks, combos, wall shimmies, swings on ropes, uppercuts and, yes, spins (and each can be strengthened as the game wears on), while taking on by far his most death-defying platforming since the original.

By pulling the camera way back Radical has opened up the game substantially. No more cramped crate-spinning environments here; Titans plays akin to the best levels in the original Crash, switching gears between epic bouts of platforming, crazed skirmishes and rampaging, boss battles, bonus rounds and surfing using Aku Aku as a skimboard. This is truly a bandicoot of another color. He even has a life bar—and a stylish one at that!

Meanwhile, the voice acting, music, animation and effects are superb and the control precise, yet forgiving enough for younger players. You can even play co-op and jack each other if you so desire.

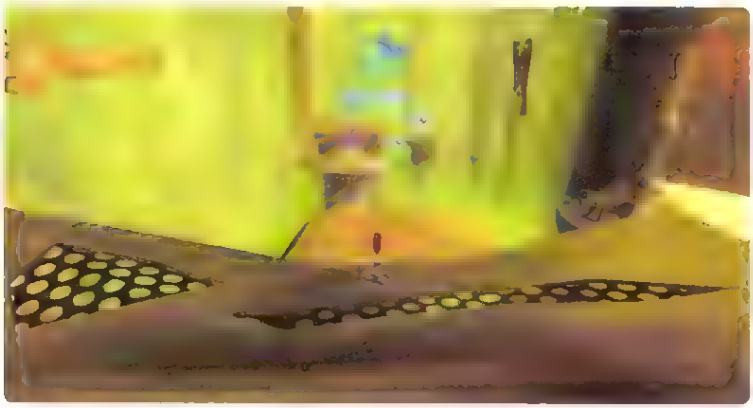
In terms of the system breakdown the game looks great and controls insanely well on Wii (especially if you like acting moves out like Brady), there's bit of a drop on PS2, and on 360 you get the same game with silky smooth 60 fps and no aliasing. Do I wish they'd have juiced it for next-gen? You betcha; in fact, playing on 360 it never leaves my mind how beautiful it would look with real fur and normal mapping, but I'll take it anyway I can get it these days. Sierra was wise in making Wii the lead platform. Surely Wii users will come out in droves for this one. You may have been expecting yet another Crash afterthought scheming to fleece you of another fiddy, but this is a rebirth well worth the investment.

Crash of the Titans — score

Fresh design, first rate voice over, great control, ton

Not quite juiced enough on 360, a few dodgy spots

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, Wii
Developer	Radical Entertainment
Publisher	[illegible] Entertainment
Online/Multi	2 player
Available	[illegible]
ESRB Rating	



Halo 3

Chiefly concerned with shooting alie

words: Greg Orlando

"I think I'll try shooting my way out," the armored hero Master Chief blithely quips to his holographic partner Cortana as events reach a fevered pitch in Halo 3. "Mix things up a bit."

This is Bungie moving the moon. In two previous Halo games, the iconic protagonist Master Chief had displayed almost zero emotion, had not even hinted that he had a sense of humor. He was, simply, the hammer that smashed down on the anvil that was Halo, an anonymous, devoid-of-personality, cookie-cutter video game hero. He came, he saw, he dual wielded. And, make no mistake, it was very, very good.

Still, Halo could have used more moments like these. It should have snuck them in. It seemed odd that in an epic trilogy involving a war between humans and a genocidal alien species that there was so little feeling, such a dearth of fleshed-out characters and, to call a spade a spade, no real *humanity*. Instead, Bungie gave the people what they wanted: shooting and lots of it.

So players looking for a story will find themselves dissatisfied with Halo 3. The game has a rather fine single-player campaign, but playing it, there's a very real sense that developers came up with a bunch of cool set pieces to play host to battles first, then went to lunch and, after many double cheeseburgers and wholly as an afterthought, crafted some plot elements to string the battles together. The story is workmanlike, competent, and even the death of a major character is handled quite professionally. Which is to say players might feel more saddened they have to get rid of the sniper rifle to make room for the brute hammer.

Halo 3 is brilliantly paced, with battles ranging from quick run-and-gun affairs

"Long after the single-player mode has been dispatched, the multiplayer mode will hold sway."

to desperate last stands against huge mechanical foes. The game allows for very little in the way of dramatic pauses; this is, after all, humanity's last stand. As such, Halo punctuates its looming threat with scenes of Master Chief having to purge entrenched covenant forces from the humans' military headquarters and then, an ominous scene with a huge black vortex swirling over the site of a covenant archaeological site.

More equals better here, and players will no doubt delight at the addition of a host of new weapons and vehicles for both forces. The addition of special equipment allows for greater flexibility and creativity. Players can create their own defensive cover with a bubble shield or assault foes with a power drainer device. Support weaponry such as huge chain guns can now be dislodged from their mounts and hauled around to make the Chief even more of a bad-ass. In this, Bungie has taken to heart the great mantra of the first-person shooter: Always provide for mayhem.

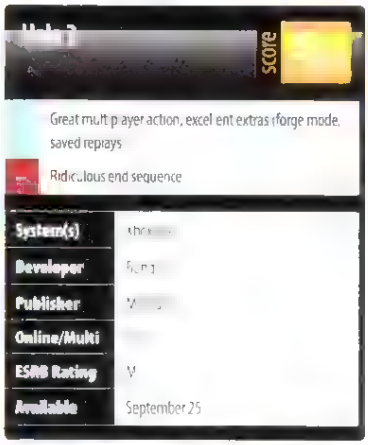
Yet Bungie has, almost willfully, not learned its lesson when it comes to simple things like clear and concise level design. Once again, players may well find themselves wandering through (okay, slogging along) a series of alien corridors that are just too similar and too poorly laid out to be easily navigable. It's here that Halo bogs down, even admitting its shortcomings by providing wayward players with an arrow to guide them to the next checkpoint.

Even more disappointing, the game swipes from itself. Fans of the original game will remember the goofy end sequence in which the Chief hopped into a Warthog and had to drive through what was, inexplicably, an off-road racing track to escape doom. In terms of design, there was no functionality to it; it was just, go figure, someone's idea of a cool end level.

Halo 3 fairly well re-creates this scene. At the end, Master Chief plows through yet another driving course, only this one is filled with grates that fall in predictable patterns and huge beams that swing down like pendulums to push the Warthog off course. In this, Halo kicks down the fourth wall. It's simply impossible not to drive the Chief to safety without thinking that this is someone's idea of a really cool driving stage in a video game.

Long after the single player mode has been dispatched, the multiplayer mode will hold sway. Simply, it's good to play together and it's very good to play Halo 3 together. Bungie has provided for giant armored troop carriers, multiplayer matches featuring zombie infestations, a great forge mode so players can modify maps to their liking, and plenty of other goodies. When matches are done, players can use the saved films option to replay every head shot, each sweet, sweet kill. It's a simply brilliant feature.

Bang. That, simply, is the sound of Halo's conclusion. The war, as it was, has been won.



[illegible]

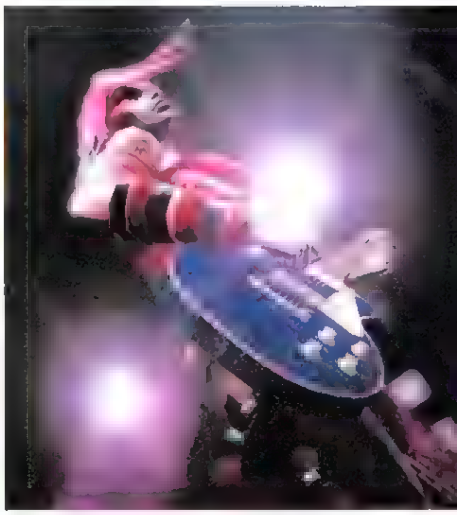
score

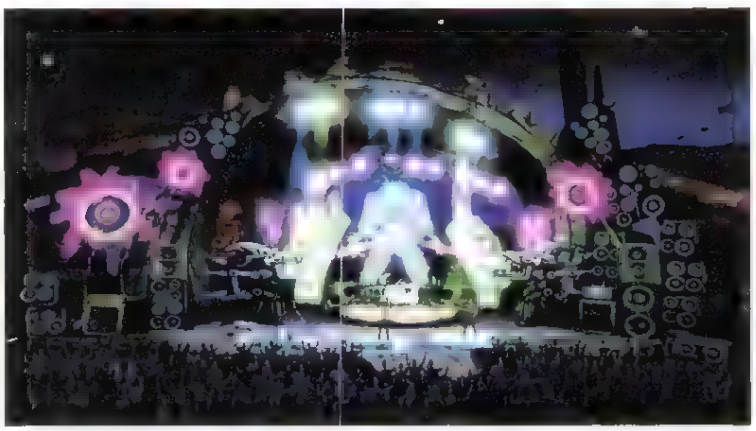
Raise those cell phones...

words [illegible]

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 (reviewed), Wii	**Multi**	[illegible]
Developer	Neversoft	**Available**	October 28
Publisher	Activision	**ESRB Rating**	T

There's not a whole lot I can tell you about what makes Guitar Hero rock that you don't already know. The music plays the fret prompts rain down, and you get your rock star on. I can however tell you what's new and improved for the game's next-gen debut, beginning with the graphics, which don't take a big leap, they freaking jump the Grand Canyon. GH III is drop-dead knock-down drag-out gorgeous to behold. I'm still doing double takes to make sure the venues are polygonal, and the player models have reached a high that will make you smash your old GH II axe Pete Townsend style. Also coming to the next-gen stage, a lot of the game's multiplayer functions (co-op, quick play...) are now fully online along with co-op career, which allows you to unlock movies, exclusive songs and guitars. It's all the Guitar Hero you could ever ask for, especially jamming with the new wireless Les Paul. I'm not wild about the fluffier tracks (Pat Benatar?), but with so much to unlock I might even sit still for an old Winger ballad. .. That was a joke





Need for Speed Pro Street

score

Puttering along the danger zone

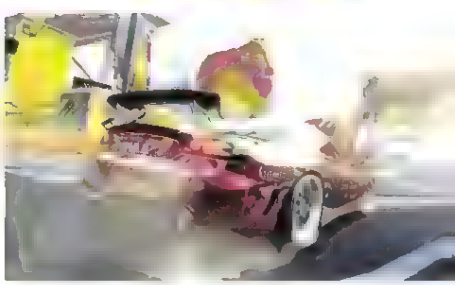
words Greg Orlando

System(s)	PS2, PS3, Xbox 360, PSP, NDS, Wii	**Multi**	Online Social Play
Developer	Black Box	**Available**	Now
Publisher	Electronic Arts	**ESRB Rating**	T

The venerable Need for Speed has suffered a sea change with its latest iteration Pro Street. Previously, the series had embraced a free-form, beat-the-cops, arcade-style philosophy with players pounding the streets to see who was the best driver. Now, the series has shifted to a more simulation-heavy affair, offering street racing that, oddly, doesn't take place on the street, but rather on closed circuit tracks across the globe.

Players will now be tasked with building the perfect car and keeping up its repair. This seems a lot closer to actual work than it should, especially since the other racers tend to headhunt, and car damage is cumulative. Performance-altering parts and modifications to a car's body can be piled on, and then the new design tested in a virtual wind tunnel.

With the new direction comes a newfound confusion as to the game's identity. Pro Street doesn't wholly abandon its arcade racer heritage; it provides players with racing assistance in the form of track lines and a minigame of sorts that precedes each race. Yet Pro Street also wants desperately to redefine itself as a simulation, and the end result, while competent, stands as a poorly defined mishmash in need of tuning.



Bladestorm: The Hundred Years' War

100 years of war, one attack button continuously held down...

score

words Greg Orlando

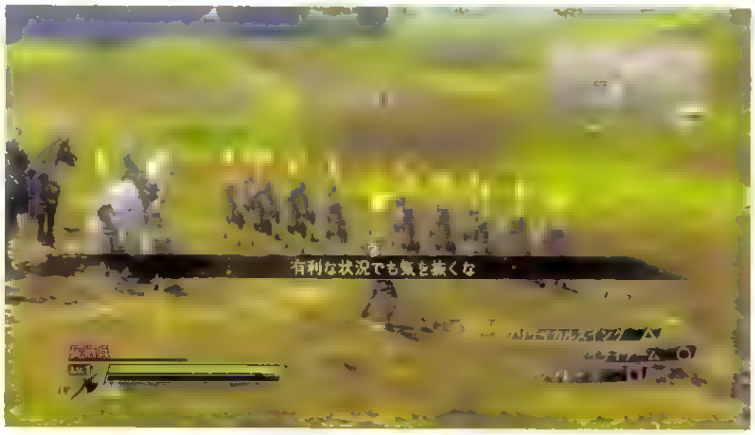
System(s)	PlayStation 3 Xbox 360	**Multi**	1-2
Developer	Omega Force	**Available**	November
Publisher	Koei	**ESRB Rating**	T

Here's how the Hundred Years' War was won: with one bumper button pressed. Bladestorm The Hundred Years' War allows players to win most, if not all, of its battles solely by holding down the right bumper button on the Xbox 360 controller.

As a mercenary leader in this expansive, and more than century-long (1337-1453) war between the British and French, it's a player's job to hold down that bumper button so his troops will attack. It's an awesome responsibility, holding down that one button, and one that shouldn't be taken lightly.

Now, to be fair, it's possible to command different types of soldiers in combat, and each has three special attacks or powerups it can perform during battles. Cavalry units can charge, boost their defenses, and make critical raids. Archers can fire poisoned arrows, target foes in the first-person perspective before unleashing a powerful volley, and take up defensive positions. These special moves are mapped to the Xbox 360's face buttons, and must be recharged after time.

The player's contributions to the fight are issuing the command, maneuvering around the battlefield, and choosing the time to issue the special attacks. In this, it would be entirely possible for players to feel more detached from battle. This would probably occur if they were, say, watching someone else hold down the bumper down ad nauseam or listening to someone explain how they held down said button while playing Bladestorm.



Sega Rally Revo

Rally hard

score

words Mike Hobbs

System(s)	PlayStation 3 Xbox 360	**Multi**	1-6 players
Developer	Sega Racing Studio	**Available**	October
Publisher	Sega	**ESRB Rating**	E

Sega Rally Revo is my kind of racing game. Though arcades may by and large be a thing of the past, the flavor of those darkened halls is thankfully alive and well in this refreshingly pure game.

For me, most modern racing games miss the boat in worrying too much about what happens off the track and under the car (excluding the Gran Turismo series which stands alone in its greatness). Sega Rally Revo, like its predecessors, is all about the thrill of flying around a track. You'll of course open up cars but this isn't a game about tinkering. Helping matters along are short, fun to master circuits which go by in a flash but are full of fast corners and terrific scenery.

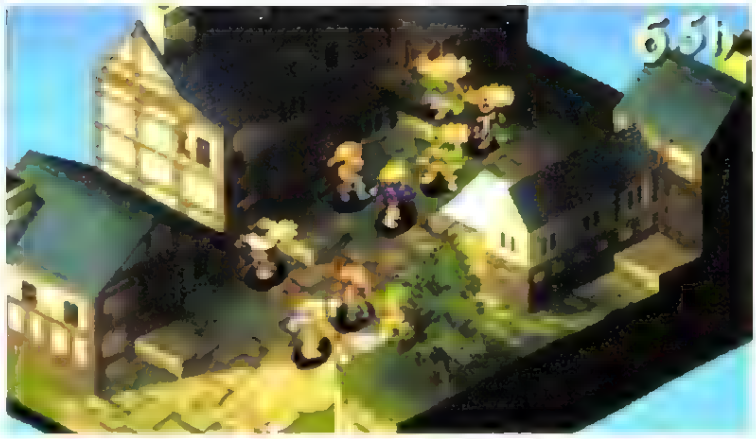
Visually, SRR doesn't hit you over the head like MotorStorm, but the game's visual appeal is very high indeed. The color palette is great, with convincing atmospherics and a vibrant, arcade-like appearance. The effect of the persistent tire tracks, both in appearance and in regards to altering the handling of the cars, is particularly well done. I also appreciate the little touches like the dramatic grave spray and convincing sound effects.

As a long-time Sega Rally fan, I am totally satisfied with this version as it gave me just what I wanted. I suspect that lovers of "deeper" games like PGR might find SRR too basic, but I defy anyone who likes racing not to enjoy a few laps in this fast and fun racer. See you on the interwebs!

Final Fantasy Tactics: War of Lions

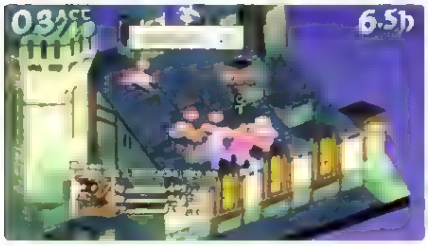
score

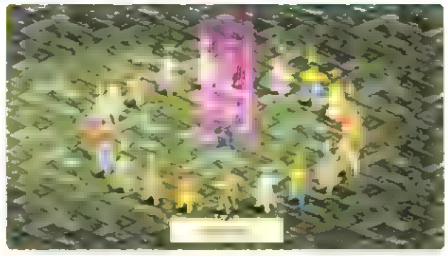
System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	Square Enix	Available	October 9
Publisher	Square Enix	ESRB Rating	T

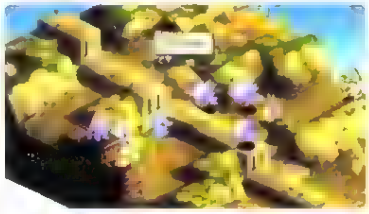


th over 200,000 PSPs sold this last week in Japan (as we went to press, the Slim had just been released), it looks like Sony's got some legs in the portable market. Frankly, it's due in large part to the work of Square Enix, whose Final Fantasy: Crisis Core moved a huge number of units in Japan. In America, we're just now getting the fine Final Fantasy Tactics: War of the Lions. In 1997, this was the game that introduced us to Ivalice (which is slowly becoming the common denominator between Final Fantasy games, thanks to the Ivalice Alliance). Ten years later, the races and politics of Ivalice are familiar and the game feels nostalgic even to those who've never played it before.

This is a beautiful and adult game, whose transition to the PSP is only marred by nearly imperceptible delays in the combat. But with the addition of extraordinary cinemas, the graceful statesman of PlayStation One becomes one of the best games on the PSP, plain and simple. Combat is balanced, deep, and wickedly varied. The sleep function ensures that even the longest battles aren't lost during train/car/plane rides, and there's enough new content for veteran players. This is a system seller. **Heather Campbell**







"the graceful statesman of PSOne becomes one of the best games on the PSP."

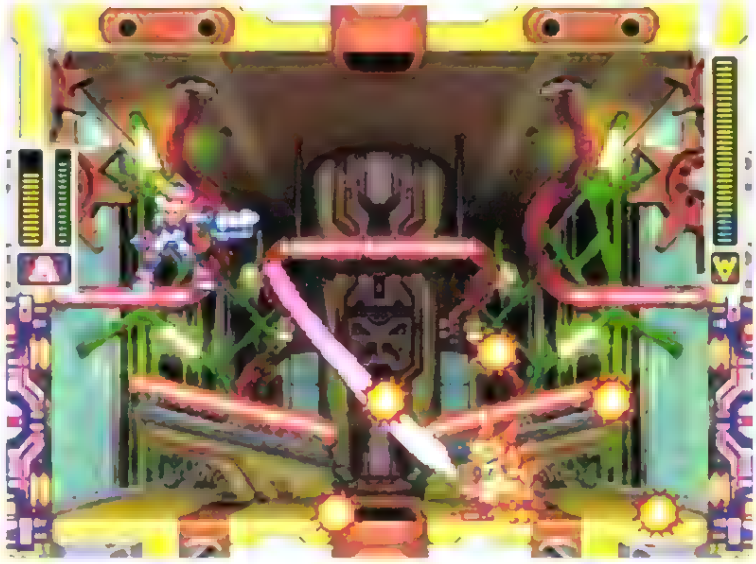
Mega Man ZX Advent

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	Co-op head-to-head downloadable mini-games
Developer	Capcom	Available	October 16
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	E

I can remember standing amidst the massive 8-bit flip-card wall back in the NES days combing the isle for anything Mega Man. Twenty years later, on a dual screen 2D marvel of a Nintendo portable, I still get excited about the majority of the games in the series. I'm over the Blue bomber himself, have been since Mega Man 8, but this new breed of Mega Men (and women) I can really get into. For one, they can duck

ZX Advent features two selectable heroes, Grey and Ash, who embark on separate but intertwining scenarios. Both can "Megamerge" into defeated bosses—they don't gain their powers, they actually become the character—as they endeavor to end the war between humans and robots. Of course this all boils down to color-drenched, painstakingly detailed gameplay-rich side-scrolling action and platforming, using the Biometal system for attacks, Megamerging, and switching forms on the fly (via stylus) to adapt to the game's many layers of play technique. Together with the wonderfully integrated story and action-RPG accoutrements, ZXA is yet another 2D diamond from Capcom. Co-op, head-to-head 2p and mini games round out another spectacular DS offering. **Dave Halverson**

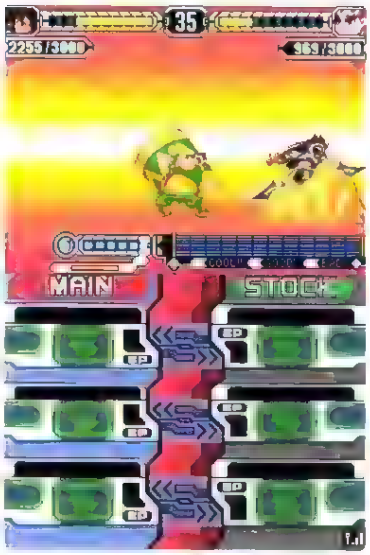


"...I still get excited about the majority of the games in the series."

Draglade

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	Online versus, stats
Developer	Dimps	**Available**	November 16
Publisher	Atlus	**ESRB Rating**	E

Chibito wants to be a Major Grapper and he's gonna take you on a massive 2D action-RPG to achieve his goal. He's spent the last five years training every day waiting for you to pick up this game, ever since he was saved by a Grapper and given a G-Con, the instrument of the latest fighting sensation. There are actually four intertwining characters/stories to select from, each with their own road to becoming a Major Grapper. Grapping is a new style of fighting and the latest pro sports sensation, combining martial arts and music using the G-Con – a weapon known as a "Glade for Matter" that emits a mysterious sound whenever it's struck. Skilled Grappers can connect the sounds creating melodies/beat combos that both deal major damage and please the enormous crowds who come out to view the spectacle. Grappers are also protectors guarding the many island cities from Variants – nature's creatures transformed into monsters. Becoming a "Major" Grapper means fame, fortune and respect, not to mention the coolest 2D action-RPG the DS has ever seen. Draglade is story rich, features a deep and rewarding new fighting system and, well, it's incredibly beautiful. **Dave Halverson**



"...the coolest 2D action-RPG the DS has ever seen."

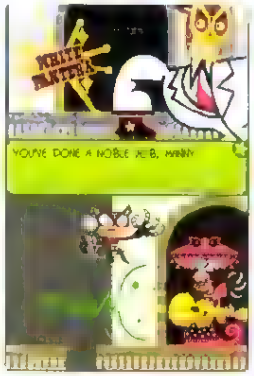
El Tigre: The Adventures of Manny Rivera

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-2
Developer	Barking Lizards	**Available**	October
Publisher	THQ	**ESRB Rating**	E

I'm going to go out on a limb here and presume that you don't watch Nickelodeon's *El Tigre*. Well, you should. Some cartoons give the age barrier a big size-12 pointy boot in the poop chute, and this is definitely one of them. Combining Day of the Dead-like super villains, masked wrestling and super heroes, El Tigre follows the exploits of Manny Rivera, a.k.a. El Tigre (cue wild cougar roar), as he fights to clean up Miracle City...or not. Together with his crime-fighting pap, White Pantera, his evil super villain Granpapi Puma Loco, and his sweetie Frida, you decide whether Manny takes the path of the righteous or evil (!) which definitely pays much better. The gameplay is a real throwback to those THQ SNES action-platformers of old, right down to the floaty control. Every so often they'd get one right (Ren & Stimpy Show, Veedios anybody?) and this is along those lines, only with much (much, much) bigger, more detailed sprites, two screens of lovely cartoon parallax, and stylus-based combos. It's irreverent, it's fun. It's totally loco!! But there is some gristle in the burrito via some mid chop in the scrolling. Otherwise calling all El Tigre fans! **Dave Halverson**

"Some cartoons give the age barrier a big size-12 pointy boot in the poop chute..."



Pick on somebody your own size Manny

Prism: Light The Way

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-2
Developer	Morpheme	**Available**	October
Publisher	Eidos	**ESRB Rating**	E

Prism: Light the Way is a classic game of single-screened, piece-manipulating puzzle solving. Glowbos are a race of aliens that need light to survive, and it just so happens that Bulboids give off light by nature. Using the various tools of light manipulation presented to you on each level, it's your job to figure out how to direct that light until all of the Glowbos are happily fed. Solutions come easy at first, and you'll be feeling proud of yourself; don't get too cocky, though, because about halfway through the game's 120+ puzzles, the difficulty really ramps up, and you'll be in for a serious mental workout. **Eric L. Patterson**

Luminous Arc

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	2
Developer	Image Epoch	**Available**	Now
Publisher	Atlus	**ESRB Rating**	T

Luminous Arc wears its label well. Strategy RPGs on DS are in no short supply but neither are the people who play them, and this one has pretty much everything a fan could hope for provided you prefer live lengthy dialogue over quick breaks between venues. The battles themselves are fairly standard issue, the difference being that every movement and command is via stylus, which is great by the way—the only drawback being the inability to rotate the playfield. You can scroll them, but in the instance you want to get a different view you can't spin them. That aside, the actual field action is thoroughly engaging, well paced, and features the slickest of execution. The road to each battle, however, runs directly through story town, so thank whatever it is you believe in that it's a good one. The basic premise revolves around The Church of Luminous, after dispatching their forces to rid the world of witches as the return of their god is close at hand. Lead by Sir Heath and his Ever Garden warriors—a dogmatic group of holy warriors sent into battle by the Dick Cheney of the church—it's clear early on that the lines between good and evil will soon become blurred, especially after meeting Lucia—a witch that penetrates the Ever Garden posing as a maid (a twist we see coming ten miles away). Are the Garden Children blinded by faith or are witches really as dangerous as Cardinal Sime Bucket claims? Only your DS knows for sure. **Dave Halverson**

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Think and Feel, Inc	**Available**	November 20, 2007
Publisher	Square Enix	**ESRB Rating**	RP

Final Fantasy XII is one of my favorite games of all time. The fact that I can say that DS title Revenant Wings is a precious spin-off of the PS2 game speaks *extremely* highly of the game. A real-time strategy sequel to the RPG original, Revenant Wings is easy fun—a candy dessert for one of the best gaming meals ever cooked up. It's not that deep, and doesn't reach for poignancy, but this seems to be the DS philosophy on gaming in general.

Taking up where Final Fantasy XII left off, Revenant Wings tells the story of Vaan and Penelo as sky pirates, blissfully plundering the world of treasure, and tackling adventure with innocence and determination. In a strange, only-in-anime way, the pair seem younger both in design and conduct than in the PS2 title, but it works for the game. This is Vaan and Penelo: Afternoon Adventures', and it makes sense, given that it was directed by Motomu Toriyama – the man behind X-2.

As I've said before, the stylus interface is perfect for RTS games, and gamers can look forward to the battery input. Since selecting troops is simple, instinctive fun, the tutorial doesn't drag on forever—a sure sign that the game plays like you expect it to.

Reportedly, the difficulty has been turned up for the North American release but it remains pretty breezy stuff. You never get the impression that there's something lacking, but experienced RTS fans may hunger for something more challenging. **Heather Campbell**

Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker

score

System(s)	[illegible]	Multi	NA
Developer	[illegible]	Available	November [illegible]
Publisher	Square Enix	ESRB Rating	[illegible]

[illegible] irst off! No matter what anyone tells you, the title for this game is stupid. I won't go on about it much, but look at it. That's a silly name for anything. When you can switch around the words and it retains just as much meaning it's time to stop. What's the difference between Monster Quest Joker Dragons and Dragon Quest Monsters Joker?

Now, sometimes a game can be less than the sum of its parts. With Dragon Quest Monsters Joker, every element is there for a great game. But there's something too calculated about the piece. It's just, for lack of a better word, soulless. The character art is (depending on your taste) solid, the gameplay is deep and well designed, but there's nothing really rapturously compelling about the title.

Maybe that's because Dragon Quest games, despite their glistening overworlds and iconic designs, just don't feel epic to me. They're light-hearted adventures with old-fashioned pace. What's more, *Monsters* games strip away a lot of the already-neutered adventuring, and leave you with what is essentially Pokémon. Collect monsters, train them, and set them against your opponent's beasts. Sure, it's nice to battle your Slimes, and the design of the DQ monsters remains sharp, but why not just play Pokemon?

The DQ Monsters series as a whole seems to beg this question, and the answer is just a matter of taste. If you don't dig Pokémon, do DQM. Or, if you've already beaten Pokémon, take a stab at DQM. In the end, though, it's just a little more of the same. The removal of random encounters is nice, and the music is fine enough. But it just doesn't feel...necessary. **Heather Campbell**

Silent Hill: Origins

score

System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	Climax	Available	[illegible]
Publisher	Konami	ESRB Rating	M

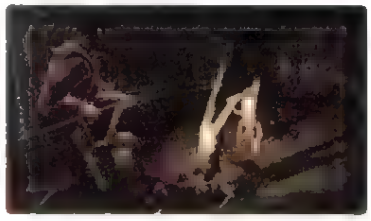
When Konami allowed a game that never deserved the title to be christened Silent Hill 4, I feared for the series that I consider my favorite game franchise of all time. I tried to be enthusiastic when Konami then announced Silent Hill Origins, but with so many initial factors working against it, I held little hope for the results.

Yet, as I clutched my PSP and partook in the adventures of trucker extraordinaire Travis Grady, I found myself returning back to the Silent Hill that I had fallen in love with so very long ago. This is not some side-story relegated to the PSP but a true new chapter worthy of its name and console-sized in scope. Visually, this game shouldn't exist on a handheld: wait until you see the flashlight effects–but much more importantly,

"This is not some side-story relegated to the PSP."

everything you expect from a Silent Hill game–from the monsters to the puzzles to the extremely detailed and well-crafted locations–is all here, and boy is it good.

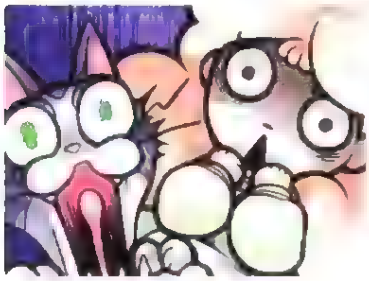
Except, that is, for one misstep that was taken in the road to creating Origins. With the use of mirrors, Travis can pass back and forth between the more normal "foggy" version of Silent Hill, and the darker, rustier "nightmare" version of the city at will. The fear of the nightmare world was never knowing when it would show up, or when escape from it would next come. Reducing that fear by giving control over those choices to the player is an unfortunate blemish on what otherwise turned out to be a truly enthralling game. Silent Hill fan or not. **Eric L. Patterson**

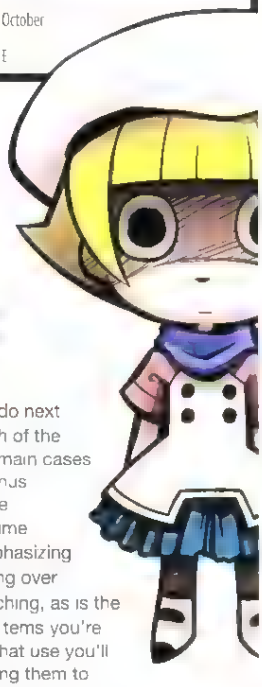


Touch Detective 2 ½

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1 player
Developer	SUCCESS BeeWorks	**Available**	October
Publisher	Atlus	**ESRB Rating**	E





The original Touch Detective was one of those games that people seemed to either love or hate with very little middle ground. The misadventures of the young touch detective Mackenzie were a nod to the days of the old-school PC adventure game, where solving each puzzle required ample amounts of mouse clicking and, at times, some real abstract thinking. Though most praised the game's lovable characters and personality, the wild swings in difficulty from obstacle to obstacle just turned off too many players.

For Touch Detective 2 ½, while the game does still occasionally regress back to that old standby tactic of "try every item on every character until something happens," the overall experience is a far more balanced and pleasing one. Figuring out what to do next through each of the game's five main cases (and one bonus case) is more logical this time around, emphasizing sharp thinking over random touching, as is the selection of items you're given and what use you'll end up putting them to. What hasn't changed (thankfully) is the game's sense of humor and quirkiness: Mackenzie once again completely steals the show, and the wacky comedy that plays out between her and the rest of the cast is as fresh and funny as it was the first time around.

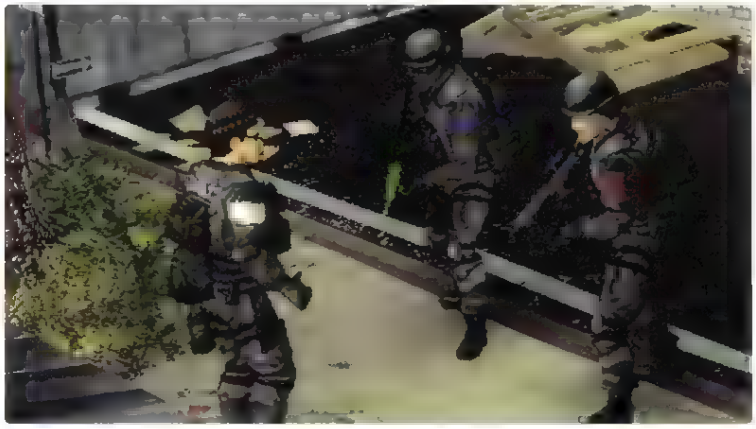
Touch Detective 2 ½ really feels like the game that the original should have been, providing for an experience that I'm sure more people will enjoy this time around. I just wish that the next time we see Mackenzie and her pals, they could have an adventure a bit bigger and broader in scope. **Eric L. Patterson**

"Mackenzie once again completely steals the show..."

SWAT: Target Liberty

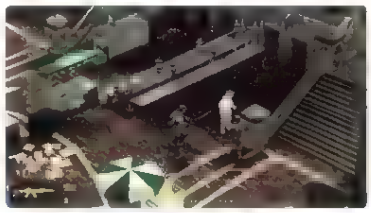
score

System(s)	PSP	**Multi**	1-4 Ad hoc
Developer	3G Studios Inc	**Available**	October
Publisher	Sierra	**ESRB Rating**	T



The slow, plodding existence of a SWAT team member isn't for everyone. In SWAT Target Liberty, players take the role of Kurt Wolfe, leader of a three-man team of hardened officers. It's their job to storm into hostile situations, neutralize the bad guys, and make the day safe for democracy.

Tactical play is emphasized here. SWAT team members neither run nor gun (okay, Wolfe can run, but it's like molasses uphill). Instead, they're trained to slowly and painstakingly clear a room, using shouted commands or force to get a suspect to surrender. Once someone's surrendered, it's then necessary to handcuff him. Players can opt to use nonlethal weaponry, are presented with multiple options for checking and opening doors, and can use simple commands to ensure their partners do their fair share. Although the formula works well, Target Liberty isn't well suited for brief gameplay sessions. It can also be maddeningly frustrating in places; context-sensitive commands require players to move Wolfe to an exact spot, but doesn't allow for the clumsiness of the PSP's analog stick, nor does the game allow for much leeway when the object (or body) in question is obscured by something else. Liberty, then, has its price. **Greg Orlando**



"The slow, plodding existence of a SWAT team member isn't for everyone."

play japan

tokyo game show 2007

2007 was supposed to be a year of orderly transition from one console generation to the next. But the year's nearly over, and the Tokyo Game Show has revealed a confused industry that's being tugged in conflicting directions. The PlayStation 3? It's chugging along, but its installed base remains too low to profitably support the mega budget games that it needs to truly succeed. But surely things will turn around now that Kaz Hirai has announced that Japanese price drop at his keynote... WHAT?! He *didn't*? Crap.

At least Japan can agree that the Xbox 360 is dead, right? Not really—no one wants to write off the 360 entirely and risk irrelevancy in the US, where the industry is seeing the majority of the growth. Then again, no one wants to make a game that will go unsold in its homeland either. Then there's the Wii—the industry's great success story—but which has so far left third parties behind as a new generation of super casual gamers refuses to acknowledge anything without the Nintendo brand.

All that leaves is the over-saturated DS platform, where third party sales have been trending downward throughout the year. Oh, and the PSP, which is experiencing a Monster Hunter 2 and PSP Slim-driven resurgence in sales. But since no one saw that coming (including Sony, apparently), no one had any major titles ready to show.

The one thing the Japanese industry agrees on is that they envy the hell out of us. Every developer we interviewed seemed deeply concerned about their games' prospects in the US, a drastic change from the "this is a Japanese game for Japan, but we hope you like it too" attitudes of yesteryear. Of course, the Tokyo Game Show doesn't reflect the trends of today as much as it reflects the trends of 2006, when most of these games began development. So while many developers have become convinced that their salvation lies in the west, we're only beginning to see the results of that philosophy. There are still enough turn-based games and big-eyed anime chicks to keep the old-school Japanophile crowd happy, but for how much longer? *Casey Loe*

1. Metal Gear Solid 4 (Konami/PS3)
2. No More Heroes (Marvelous/Wii)
3. Guilty Gear 2: Overture (Arc Systems/X360)
4. Valkyrie of the Battlefield (Sega/PS3)
5. Final Fantasy IV (Square Enix/DS)

BONUS: Devil May Cry 4 (Capcom/X360 & PS3)
It's like the fifth time we've seen DMC4 at a trade show, but it looks a whole lot better now than it ever has before.

1. Ryu Ga Gotoku: Kenzan! (Sega/PS3)
2. Ninja Gaiden II (Microsoft/X360)
3. Infinite Undiscovery (Square Enix/X360)
4. Lost Odyssey (Microsoft/X360)
5. Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep (Square Enix/PSP)

BONUS: Final Fantasy Versus XIII (Square-Enix/PS3)
We still have no idea what this game even is, but *damn* that computer animation is amazing.

Words Nick Des Barres, Casey Loe, Heather Campbell and Dai Kohama
Pictures Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama

capcom

Devil May Cry 4

Resident Evil 5 was a total no-show at the TGS, but that may be just as well, given the strides DMC4 is making every time it's shown. What was looking like an on-par next-gen game at its debut last year now stands graphically with any other game I can think of, running at a locked 60 frames with elaborate self-shadowing and post-processing effects. Escaping for a moment's respite from the madness of the show floor, we sat down with producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi to talk about how Capcom made it happen.

Interview With Hiroyuki Kobayashi, Producer, Devil May Cry 4
Interview by Nick Des Barres. Transcribed by Dai Kohama
Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: First I'd like to ask about the task of porting DMC4 to 360. I know Capcom's MT Framework engine was designed to allow easy cross-platform development, but is it really that simple?
Hiroyuki Kobayashi: Actually, it was really difficult getting our MT Framework engine to run on the PS3. When our company announced DMC4 for 360, the engine had already been up and running on the system for Dead Rising and Lost Planet, so it was a very smooth transition. There weren't any major problems to speak of.

Would you say the PS3 and 360 versions are identical, then?
Yes. They both come from the original version built on PCs with the MT Framework engine, so they're both the same.

Not just feature-identical, but visually identical as well.
Completely identical.

The PS3 version will be using the DualShock 3's vibration function, right?
It will. We've got them on the show floor vibrating already (laughs). I've done so much press where the interviewer asked me, "so the 360 version will rumble and the PS3 version won't?" and I've had to say, "that's right," because it was still a secret!

You've said before you want to get back to the series' roots with DMC4. Does that mean a change in tone from 3, or a return to an open-world structure?
I think DMC4 is most close to 3 in structure. This may be because it's the same team that did DMC3, although myself and a few other members did work on DMC1. The reason DMC1 had an open-world structure was because it was originally planned to be an action-adventure like Resident Evil, so there was no need to divide the world into areas. However, we found that a pure action game became stressful to play in such a large space, so we decided to break them up with 3. It's the same with 4, you can't backtrack. It's really just a question of game design.

> "we found that a pure action game became stressful to play in such a large space..."

One thing a lot of people had problems with in DMC3 was the extremely high difficulty, especially so for the North American version. How are you approaching the difficulty to this game? Will it be the same for all regions?
Even the Japanese version of DMC3 was hard, wasn't it (laughs). This is something I acknowledge, and the team acknowledges. As you know, we made the American version even harder, and I felt that we did something a little cruel to our fans there. This time the difficulty levels are the same worldwide, and there's a tutorial so people unfamiliar with the series can gradually build up their skills. With Nero as the new main character, we're able to start over with a clean slate, so both DMC fans and new users can begin at the same starting line. The game begins easy and gradually ramps up to a DMC3 level of difficulty, so I think players will really be able to feel the progress they've made as their skills get better.

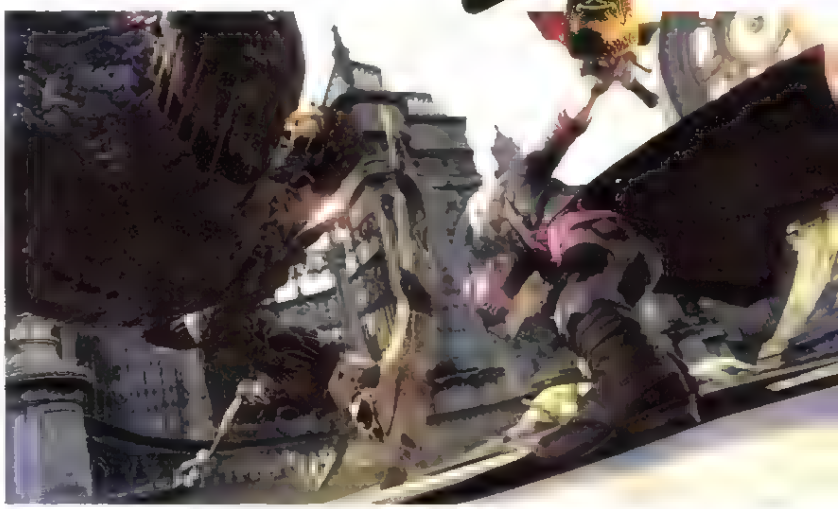
Will you still cater to the ultra-hardcore with a vicious difficulty mode?
Oh, of course, of course (laughs). We have a pretty crazy final difficulty. I think the hardcore fans will be happy.

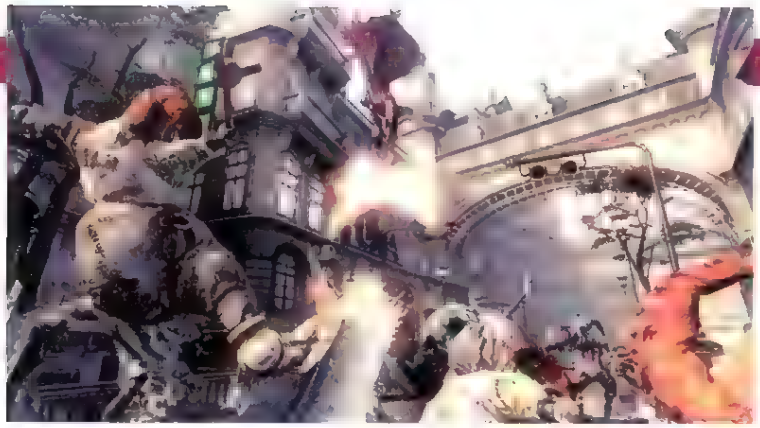
We've known for some time the player will get to control Dante as well as Nero. Is Dante just a bonus? Is the story mostly Nero?
Well, you start as Nero (laughs).

So you get to play as Dante during the main game.
You do. It's not as if Nero and Dante have separate stories, or separate modes. In the very first mission, you fight Dante as Nero and learn how to use his gun, his sword and the Devil Bringer arm. From the second mission onwards, the game plays like a standard Devil May Cry, and eventually, after the heroine Kyrie gets kidnapped, Nero passes the baton to Dante. It's one story with two heroes.

Are Nero and Dante the only playable characters?
Yes, those two.

While Dante has his full repertoire of weapons and styles, it seems like Nero just has three–revolver, sword and Devil





Bringer.
Unlike Dante, Nero won't gather weapons and power them up as he goes. Instead, his right arm–the Devil Bringer–powers up. At first you can only throw enemies with it, but eventually you'll next be able to pull them in, then use it to move. You can really do a huge amount of things with the arm. Dante, on the other hand, has several new weapons. The Gilgamesh, the new hand-to-hand weapon, for instance, has a whole variety of martial arts moves like heel drops and jump kicks...and there's another really cool new weapon for Dante, too. I can't say too much, but when showed our staff the plans they were really excited, saying, "I can't wait to use that!" (laughs)

We're looking forward to it. Will DMC4 solve the mystery as to whether or not Dante's brother Vergil is still alive?
Everybody loves Vergil, don't they (laughs)? I didn't personally work on DMC3, but Vergil appeared in 1 as Nelo Angelo and I think he's been built up into a really interesting character. However, DMC4 is Nero's story with a supporting turn from Dante, so we decided to let Vergil sit this one out.

Speaking of Dante, Vergil and Nelo Angelo–in Japanese, "Nelo" and "Nero" are written with the same characters. Is there a connection?
I really can't say (laughs). We chose the name "Nero" for the DMC4 hero for many reasons, although we did have several other candidates. Why we went with "Nero" should become clear as you play through the story, and find out if he has any connection with Vergil/Nelo Angelo.

And Nero looks exactly like the young Dante and Vergil from DMC3...

> "God of War is very popular and I think it's a great series, but it leans more towards puzzles than DMC."

There's a secret in that. We think a gun, a sword and a long coat is an unshakable image for a DMC hero, but we didn't make Nero look like Dante for no reason. Originally, we had a hero that looked like a mod British youth with a Beatles hairdo and fashionable clothes, but we thought he seemed too serious and grown up to be a DMC hero. We arrived at the look, and the name Nero, after a lot of trial-and-error.

The conversation has turned to design, so I'd like to ask about Tatsuya Yoshikawa and his involvement in the project. Most people looking at Nero would be very surprised he was designed by the lead artist from the Breath of Fire series...
Yes. Yoshikawa worked on the entire Breath of Fire series and Mega Man. People know him for his anime style designs, but he can do realistic stuff too–it was just never seen by the public. Even I hadn't seen his realistic work, but after looking it over we thought he would be a great match for the world of Devil May Cry. It's both my and Itsuno's first time working with him.

They really are wonderful designs. I never would have guessed this was Yoshikawa's work.
Right? Right? You'd never know he was the Breath of Fire guy (laughs). It was a lot of fun working with him. I think people who are familiar with his older art are going to be really impressed.

What about the background design? The series has been famous for its gothic backdrops, but the city of Fortuna in DMC4 looks like it could almost exist. Did your team go location-scouting for Fortuna's design?
Yes, we went to Italy, Turkey... a lot of Mediterranean port towns. I didn't personally go, but our background team bought an incredibly expensive digital camera and took tons of photos, which they brought back to Japan, finessed and used as in-game textures. It's just not the kind of scenery you can find in this country...you really do have to go there.

Here at TGS the returning heroines Trish and Lady were shown for the first time. It's been a *long* time since DMC3 in the continuity, right?
Along time, yes. The continuity goes DMC3, DMC1, DMC4.

But Trish and Lady haven't aged a day, and seem to know each other.
They actually meet each other for the first time in the DMC anime, which takes place after DMC1 but before DMC4. As far as their looks, Trish is a demon so she doesn't age (laughs). Lady didn't have an official age in DMC3, but we thought of her as being in her late teens. When you see DMC4's Lady in motion, I think you'll notice she's definitely an adult, she's much sexier in her late 20s.

Can you talk a little bit about finding the series' tone? A lot of people were disappointed with the grim mood of DMC2, and then the almost slapstick comedy of 3.
I'm fond of both styles, but we knew Nero wasn't going to be a character with the humor of Dante from the beginning. Nero's hot-blooded, he's direct. To put it in baseball terms, Nero is a fastball, and Dante is a curveball. Of course, being direct doesn't mean being serious. At the beginning of the game he's supposed to be listening to a sermon at church but he's got his headphones on, obviously. He's also got a soft spot for the ladies: he lets Kyrie scold him like an older sister (laughs). So, Nero may not be serious, but he isn't the kind of guy who would surf on missiles or scream "YEAH!" while battling foes with a guitar. Dante, however, is still the same guy he was in DMC3–there's lots of comic relief with him. Wait until you see the scene where he's got a rose in his mouth (laughs).

Are you considering any downloadable content for DMC4?
We were considering something, but with DLC it has to already be on the game disc before you ship, and there just wasn't time to do it. There's no DLC, but we will have net features. A leaderboard at the least, so you can compare how many Style Points you have with your friends.

Our time's running out but I have to ask you if you've seen Ninja Gaiden II on Xbox 360 yet. [Ninja Gaiden Executive Producer] Mr. Itagaki is very proud of hating your games...
I did see it (laughs).

What did you think?
I think it looked a lot like Ninja Gaiden on Xbox (laughs). I get asked this so often...."What do you think of Ninja Gaiden? What do you think of God of War?"

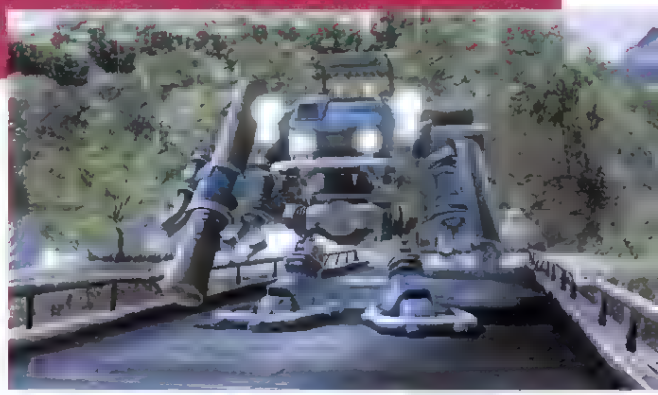
What *do* you think of God of War?
I actually met David Jaffe at an awards ceremony in America. He told me he was very fond of Capcom games, Onimusha, DMC and Resident Evil, and that he had incorporated many aspects of them into God of War. I was flattered. God of War is very popular and I think it's a great series, but it leans more towards puzzles than DMC. It's a different kind of game. Lately Western action games seem to be following its lead: games like Heavenly Sword all have the context-sensitive action button prompts. For us, however, we want you to use your own skills and techniques to do impressive-looking things. As far as Mr. Itagaki...he does what he does, and we do what we do (laughs).

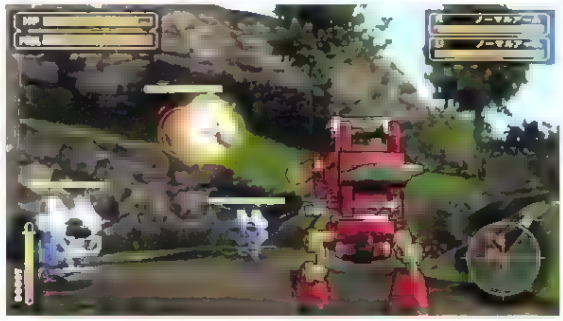
I honestly prefer what you do. If you have a final word for your American fans...
I know our DMC fans really like Dante. I worked on the first DMC myself, I love him too. In 4 he's an adult, he can handle anything–he's a hero. Nero, on the other hand, is still a rookie, still young, still a bit of a boy: he's going to *become* a hero. We're going to do this swapping of lead characters through gameplay, and I hope our fans will enjoy that. There's that scene where Nero dropkicks Dante in the face–think some of our fans had a problem with it (laughs). From our standpoint, that scene was made with love. It's not disrespect to Dante, it's showing that he's the kind of guy that can just shrug something like that off. I really hope our fans come to enjoy Nero as much as they do Dante. DMC4 will be coming out at the very beginning of the year: please look forward to it.

also shown

irem

Bumpy Trot 2 and Bumpy Trot: Vehicle Battle Tournament



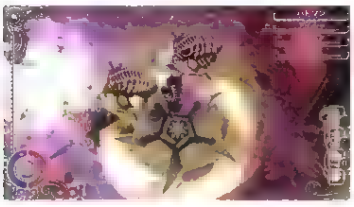


Where many smallish Japanese third parties from the 8-bit era have simply ceased to be, Irem has remained. Shucking off their flagship shooting series, R-Type (though not entirely—we review the wonderful PSP spinoff R-Type Tactics next month) in favor of a resurgence defined by constant innovation, Irem has produced fascinating niche games like the Disaster Report series and Bumpy Trot in recent years. You may be familiar with the latter as Steambot Chronicles, the title it was given when localized by Atlus to much cult acclaim. A purely Japanese take on the Western sandbox genre of adventure games, Bumpy Trot placed you in a fantasy steampunk world defined by immense freedom as a boy in command of a highly-customizable steam-powered mecha. That formula is set to continue in Bumpy Trot 2 for PS3, present at the show in the form of a brief realtime demo. It looked, frankly, gorgeous, trading in the cel-shaded look of the original for one reminiscent of Pixar CG animation—an immense achievement for a company as small as Irem. Zero gameplay details have been revealed, but it has been confirmed that the game will retain the open world structure of the original. Though Bumpy Trot 2 may be quite a ways off, Irem is also readying a PSP iteration of the series to tide fans over in 2008. The adventuring aspect may be unfortunately absent, but Bumpy Trot: Vehicle Battle Tournament expands on the mech battle/customization aspect of the first game and retains its anime stylings. As the title suggests, Vehicle Battle Tournament is at its heart a melee-style fighting game, playable with up to four players via adhoc wireless. Let's hope Atlus sees fits to bring one or both of these games to American shores

hudson

Dungeon Explorer DS & Dungeon Explorer PSP

Ah, the sweet PC Engine/TurboGrafx 16. Even now, it remains my most beloved game system that ever was, and the Dungeon Explorer series had always been among my favorites. While the Hudson of 2007 seems content to pump out B-grade budget software for Wii, it's encouraging that they still remember their roots. Witness two completely different games based on the long-dormant franchise for Nintendo DS and PSP, Dungeon Explorer: Domain of the Evil God, and Dungeon Explorer: Door of the Covenant, respectively. To be released on the same day, each follows the same, classic Dungeon Explorer formula, but contain entirely different quests. Both offer three-player simultaneous action-RPG dungeon exploration, and though the PSP version is clearly the more beautiful, the DS game supports features it does not. Pre-adventure voice chat and play over the internet via Wi-Fi. For those unfamiliar with the series (and who can blame you, it's been more than a decade), it might best be described in modern terms as a fusion between Atlus's Etrian Odyssey and Capcom's Monster Hunter series. You will create your own character from one of 36 combinations of race and class on PSP (though only 9 are available on DS) and build your level through the one-player story mode to go adventuring with friends over wireless. The cynic in me knows these two games are probably a knee-jerk response to the runaway success of Etrian Odyssey and especially Monster Hunter in Japan, but I find pleasure in the fact that Hudson hasn't forgotten where they came from. Who knows, maybe Bonk and Star Soldier are next



also shown

konami

Metal Gear Solid 4
Metal Gear Solid Online

Finally. Finally, with these hands, I have played Metal Gear Solid 4. It's been a long time coming–indeed, the longest time between initial trailer and playable debut of any MGS game. Many cynics speculated there was nothing ready, that MGS4 was but a collection of cutscenes, that it was being reworked for Xbox 360. At TGS, these voices were silenced. MGS4 is real, folks, and it's coming next spring exclusively on the PlayStation 3. Forget the absurdly labyrinthine plot, talk of shortened telomeres, nanomachines and psychic cyborg wolves. When it comes down to it, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting.

And it was most sweet indeed. The TGS build offered all comers a chance to play the area Hideo Kojima demoed on stage at July's PlayStation Premiere event, and upon beginning it one immediately noticed the massive changes made to the series' much-derided CODEC system. Now in full 3-D, CODEC conversations are far punchier than staring at two static faces, with interactive visual flashback information that can be viewed like HTML hyperlinks within the text. For those completely bored with the series' pontificating, conversations can even be skipped entirely and reviewed at any time with the new rewind feature.

Settling into the demo, it quickly became apparent this was not the MGS you thought you knew. Control has been considerably revamped, with the traditional action button placed on Triangle now used for a variety of context-sensitive actions. In addition to its legacy uses, like climbing and vaulting over objects, it now places you behind cover and allows you to stick to walls without holding down "up." Snake will stay there until you press Triangle again, allowing for much more effective use of cover during firefights. Holding it down will cause Snake to play dead, an effective tactic in a warzone littered with countless dead bodies. You can also now run in crouched stance, instead of automatically going into a crawl.

The Caution and Alert phases have been almost entirely done away with. Snake's current status instead represented by a "Threat Ring" that always surrounds him and indicates the direction of enemy presence, turning a garish red when he's spotted or attacked. Two new gauges also stood out. The Psyche Meter and the Stress Meter. Environmental factors such as heat and wind will affect Snake's psyche, which must be replenished by–get this–flicking through the pages of nude magazines, a decidedly Kojiman touch. The Stress indicator is shown as a number beneath the Psyche bar, and will spike depending on the threat level Snake currently faces in battle. A total combat situation will result in Snake entering a battle high, allowing for more accurate aiming and less damage, but there is a downside. This state will eventually cause Snake to bottom out, exhausting his psyche meter and reducing performance.

> "Settling into the demo, it quickly became apparent this was not the MGS you thought you knew..."

Further massive changes were evident in the combat system, now much more a part of the central game experience. Previous Metal Gear games have been defined by stealth, but on a battlefield there is often nowhere to hide, and firefights are now a necessity. In the stage we played, Snake can opt to join militia in intense battles to earn their trust, with an auto-lockon feature now available in addition to a more traditional aiming system that allows for precise shots rendered in Resident Evil 4-style over-the-shoulder view.

I could go on about such features as the weapon customization, new CQC holds and playing opposing enemy sides against each other, but needless to say, MGS4 is an exhilarating, real experience that is almost here. Also announced at TGS is the fact that Metal Gear Online, previously speculated to be a separate release, will actually be packaged with MGS4 proper. Though it will still require a fee to play, this only comes as welcome news, and Kojima expressed his intention at the show to support MGO for ten years. I could not be more excited about MGS4, and if any game can reverse the PS3's ill fortunes, this is it.

konami cont.

Metal Gear Solid Portable Ops+

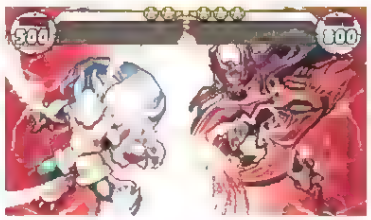
The bang-up job Kojima Production did on PSP with Metal Gear Solid Portable Ops continues in the form of the budget-priced, online-play focused expansion Portable Ops+, released the same week as the show. (Unfortunately, it has not yet been announced for American release, and currently remains a Japanese exclusive, so please bear that in mind as you read this.) The original MGSPO offered a fine one-player mode, but many hardcore fans would argue its meatiest features were to be found in the Wi-Fi multiplayer modes. MGSPO+ caters to that crowd, with several new maps, missions, play styles and characters, including Raiden, the strangely-unplayable-in MGSPO Roy Campbell, and even the first chance anywhere to control Old Snake from MGS4. A new, story-free one-

player game dubbed Infinity Mode is also available, similar to the VR Training subgames in previous MGSes.

MetalGear Solid Bande Dessinée

Metal Gear Solid Bande Dessinée (known in the West as Metal Gear Solid: The Digital Graphic Novel) on PSP maybe have sold a grand total of six copies worldwide, but I absolutely loved it. It may have been overpriced, but it was a novel entry in the PSP's library and reduced the story of MGS1 to pure narrative, something like Hideo Kojima's famed adventure games of yore. Bande Dessinée 2 aims to do one better, with a fully-voiced story (the original had none), much more extensive digital manipulation of comic artist Ashley Wood's paintings, and a story that unfolds from the perspective of Solid Snake, augmenting Raiden's story with scenes and situations only hinted at in the original game. Unfortunately, like MGSPO+, it has not yet been confirmed for American release...and with the complications of getting the English MGS2 voice cast together again to record new dialogue, it may never be.

also shown

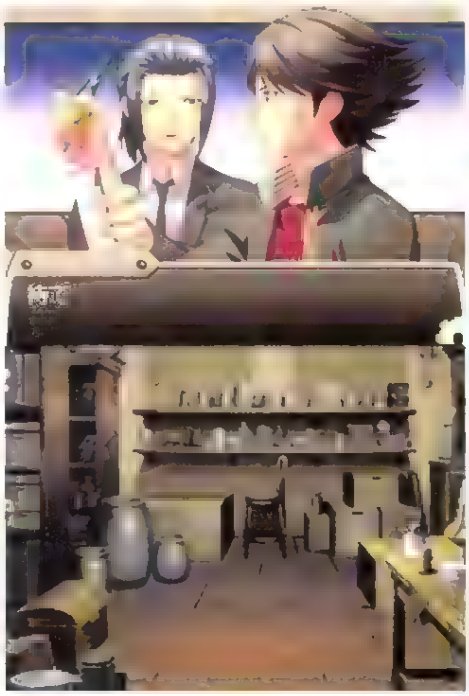


Time Hollow

"My parents died yesterday. Or rather, I realized yesterday that they had died twelve years ago." Time Hollow begins with that line of dialogue from Horo Tokio, a high-school sophomore who suddenly finds history changing all around him, and seems to be the only one capable of noticing. Now, armed with a Hollow Pen that allows him to open portals to the past, Horo has to change everything back to the way it was supposed to be.

The game works like this. In the midst of normal digital-comic conversation scenes, Horo's friends disappear in mid-sentence, and a series of mysterious images flash before his eyes. Horo must then wander into town to figure out how the past has been altered and find people who can help him make sense of the flashbacks. Once he knows the exact time and place of each image, he can visit the same spot and use his Hollow Pen (aka. the DS stylus) to draw a small hole into the past and make changes. For example, after one of Horo's friends is killed in a motorcycle accident he can draw a circle around the bike rack at a restaurant where she had eaten the day before the crash, and reach through the hole to pull out the keys, forcing her to walk home instead. By solving an episodic series of small, time-twisting mysteries, Horo will draw ever closer to preventing his parents' deaths and figuring out who caused them in the first place.

It was probably the success of the Phoenix Wright series that lead Konami to fund a high-budget DS adventure title and give it nearly as much TGS floor space as Metal Gear Solid 4. I ventured into their cavernous showroom prepared to hate Time Hollow for pulling Producer Junko Kawano away from my beloved Genso Suikoden series, but the lady knows how to craft a good time-travel game (it's her second, after the early PS2 title Shadow of Destiny), and Time Hollow's voiced scenarios and original AIC animation sequences won me over pretty quickly. We'll be back with more details when the game ships in early 2008.



koei

Dynasty Warriors 6

Dynasty Warriors fans have had it tough lately. An endless stream of ports, spinoffs, and ports of spinoffs have clogged Japanese release channels, reducing the exhilarating original formula to cookie-cutter factory-line shovelware. I admit to once being a fan, but things have been tough lately. It is for precisely that reason that I'm excited about Dynasty Warriors 6. For the series' first outing on next-gen (well, first non-Gundam, *original* outing on next-gen), developers Omega Force have gone back to the drawing board, aiming for nothing less than a total reboot of the franchise. The sixth installment will (finally) sport a redesigned game system, now allowing for movement not confined to an endless, flat plain. You can direct your general to climb ramparts and towers, smash down walls, commandeer boats and even leap into moats and lakes to swim. All the characters from the series have been given complete and total redesigns, some even swapping weapons. This may be taking them ever-farther from their historical origins into the realm of fantasy and, but hey, that's cool—I've been living with Koei's now decade-old interpretations of Liu Bei and Cao Cao for long enough, and they weren't exactly bastions of historical accuracy to begin with. Other new additions will include seamless transitions into and out of the general duels introduced in part 4, as well as animal combatants (!) like wolves and tigers. Whether or not this reboot will reduce the number of playable generals from the currently standing 48 remains to be seen, but when it looks this gorgeous does it really matter? Dynasty Warriors 6 is due for simultaneous dual-platform release in Japan in November, with an American release to follow in 2008.

also shown

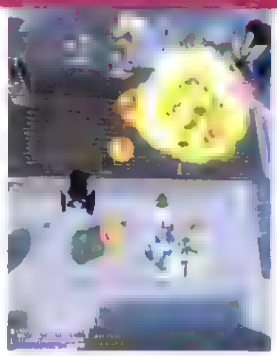
Opoona

Opoona's main marketing hook is that it is played entirely with the Nunchuk, a feature that baffles me to no end. The Wiimote is already a one-handed controller, so what's the point? So you can groom pets or perform dental surgery with your *right* hand while you play? But Opoona does deliver on its dubious promise of a one-handed RPG that's ridiculously simple to control—you barely use the Nunchuk's two buttons, and the game is virtually free of menus. In battle, you press down on the analog stick to build up a charge, and then release it to attack. That is literally the only thing you can do in battle, so don't expect a lot of strategic depth from this one. On the bright side, Opoona has some very pretty environments (mixed in with some very ugly ones) and an original Hitoshi Sakimoto score, which, like the other 35 games composed by Sakimoto this year, makes Opoona sound exactly like Final Fantasy XII. Oh, if only it were.

arc system works

Castle Shikigami

Arc System Works. My favorite little third party that could. A few years ago, all Arc had to its name was Guilty Gear. I wasn't complaining, but at TGS the company proved that it has many more tricks up its sleeve. Case in point: Castle Shikigami III, a series changing publishers for the fourth time, is getting a dual-platform release this year on Wii and PC. While the traditional shooter genre seems to be migrating to the realms of downloadable content, Shikigami's scads and scads of voice acting from known anime seiyu would probably make this impossible. Much higher-budget than most shooters of late, the series has always had quality presentation and III is no exception: Lush polygonal backgrounds explode in geometric orgies of line and color. In short, a quality shooter, with a surprisingly deep backstory.



arc system works cont.

Guilty Gear 2: Overture

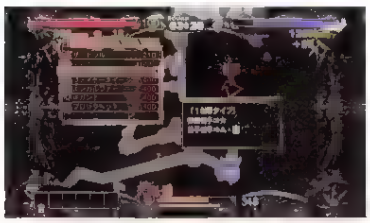
Guilty Gear 2: Overture may have come out of nowhere and become many an attendee's Game of Show (indeed, it graces our own Top 5 list), but Play knew. We knew from the first moment we saw screenshots and understood the breadth of what Arc System Works was planning that the game would be something very special indeed. Completely throwing everything out that made the series a cult hit over the last nine years, director/producer/game designer/writer/character designer/lead artist Daisuke Ishiwatari has gone back to square one to develop what he describes as "the ultimate competition tool."

Notice that he didn't say "the ultimate *fighting* tool." Guilty Gear 2 is not a fighting game, per se. Rather, it is an entirely new type of online competitive experience, a fusion between Sega's Virtual On, a frenetically fast-paced RTS, and the original Guilty Gears. Selecting one of an as-yet unspecified total number of characters (dig the three newly revealed at TGS on this page), you will engage in furious battle with up to four players simultaneously across massive, multi-tiered stages. It's a bit difficult to explain, so let me take it influence-by influence.

The Virtual On inspiration is evident in the game's controls and camera, which is fixed behind your character at all times. The mechanics of jumping and dashing can be most closely compared to Sega's seminal mecha duel simulator, with huge, arcing leaps and lightning-fast dashes used to traverse the sprawling arenas. The RTS elements form the heart of the gameplay, as simply defeating your opponents doesn't net you a victory–they simply take a penalty and respawn. To win, you have to secure territory and capture your opponent's base through the use of Servants, NPC units you must buy and deploy in realtime. Each Master, or player character, has a wide variety of Servants to choose from, each with different skills and weaknesses, all unique to that particular Master. Finally, the series' history makes itself evident in close-quarters battles, with classic Guilty Gear "Gatling Combos," special moves, and aerial launchers.

> "Guilty Gear 2 is not a fighting game, per se."

That's just a nutshell description, and in action over Xbox Live the experience is nothing less than *totally awesome*. Guilty Gear 2 is no visual slouch, either: It runs at a blistering 60fps and looks sensational with the screen crowded with dozens of Servants all smashing into each other in a tremendous pyrotechnic display. The game is set to be released this year in Japan, and although it does not yet have a US publisher, you can be sure one will be found. With Guilty Gear 2: Overture, Daisuke Ishiwatari set out to redefine the way we think about competitive video games, and already I can tell you he has succeeded. Look forward to much more coverage in the coming months.



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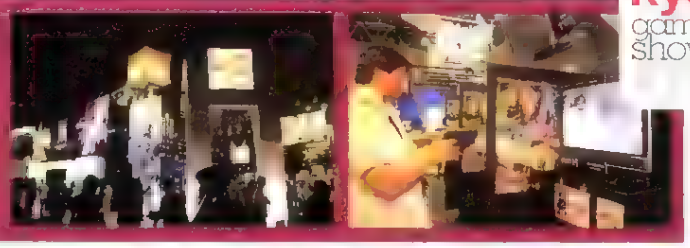
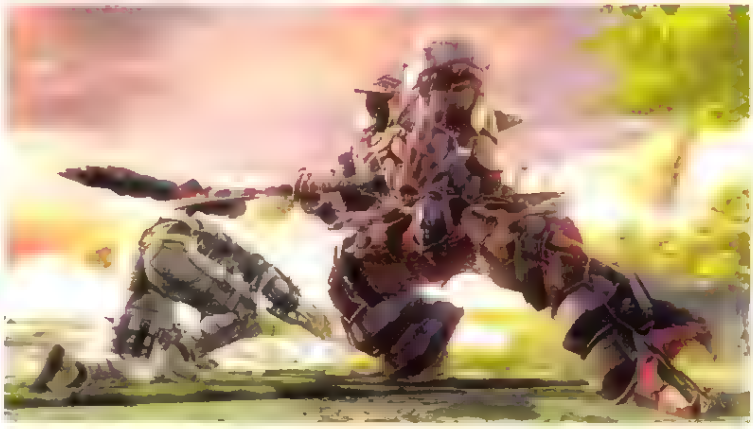
namco bandai



Soulcalibur IV



Let's be honest. Namco hasn't been doing so well on next-gen. Though the developer has been considered a technical powerhouse since the days of the original PlayStation, all of their next-gen offerings so far have worn mediocrity on their collective sleeves. Am I being harsh? Perhaps, but this may simply be because I've finally seen Soulcalibur IV in the flesh.

This is the Namco I know. Few can argue Project Soul has long boasted the company's finest talent in the realms of art, design, animation and programming, so perhaps the visual shock of Soulcalibur IV should come as no surprise. And yet even after seeing the E3 trailer, I was still largely without faith. The character models and lighting were beautiful, but once again action seemed to be confined to small, square arenas with little or no interactivity. In motion, however, the game tells a different tale entirely.

It tells a tale of swords and souls, if may be so bold. Any worries that Project Soul would not knock IV out of the park were dispelled by a trip to Namco Bandai headquarters in Tokyo, where Play was given the opportunity to watch a realtime guided demo played by producer Katsutoshi Sasaki on an Xbox 360. First impressions: Dumbfoundingly gorgeous. The porcelain doll faces that worried so from the E3 trailer were revealed to be remarkably expressive, and the character models are arguably the best ever seen in a realtime video game. The lighting is ethereal, ghostlike: All characters sport a glowing rim light that gives them the appearance of being perpetually lit by an Academy Award-winning cinematographer. Destructible environments were on display with breakable objects strewn across some stages. And it goes without saying, all at 60 frames per second.

> "Soulcalibur IV is coming, it's next-gen, it's visually stunning, and it's going to be online."

Namco was unforthcoming about new gameplay details at our meeting, preferring instead to show off character Hildegard Von Krone–Hilde, for short. Her design, Sasaki said, came from a desire at Project Soul to create a sexy, yet fully-clothed female character. Indeed, only her sumptuous lips are visible, peeking out from beneath a great helm. In a first for the series, Hilde wields two different weapons: A lance topped with a flowing banner, and a short sword. Instead of the traditional horizontal/vertical setup, one button is assigned to each weapon, and she is said to control unlike any other Soul series character. If only they had let us get our own hands on that tempting Xbox 360 controller to make sure.

On the character select screen, from which only characters previously revealed in screenshots were selectable, we counted a total of 30 spaces. That was exciting, but even more was a glimpse at IV's character creation mode. Sasaki assured us that we would now be able to take our creations online to duel with other souls around the globe, and hinted at far-reaching customization mechanics that will allow players to design their own movesets.

For the longtime Soulcalibur fan, the meeting was a wonderful one. Soulcalibur IV is coming, it's next-gen, it's visually stunning, and it's going to be online. Project Soul, I don't know why I ever doubted you. Now hurry up and get the game to market.

namco bandai cont.

Soulcalibur Legends

Soulcalibur Legends has got a lot of flak. "It's horrifically ugly," some say, "it has nothing to do with Soulcalibur." I beg to differ to me, it's one of the most beautiful games on the Wii platform. You're just never going to get PS3/360 visual fidelity on Wii, and certainly not with a dozen characters on screen in expansive environments. Comparisons to two characters fighting in a miniature box on much more powerful hardware are unfair. More importantly, however, Soulcalibur Legends is *fun*. I could argue that with the series' longstanding, elaborate backstory, it almost does lend itself more to an action-adventure game than it does one on-one fighting. After having finally played the game at TGS, I can say with confidence that if you enjoy the one-player modes from the Soul series, you will enjoy Legends. Play caught up with series producer Jin Okubo at the show to talk about it.

Interview with Jin Okubo, Producer, Soulcalibur Legends
Interview by Heather Campbell and Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: The Soulcalibur series has been consistently popular, but sales were down for III. Is that part of the reason you decided to try a new genre with Legends?
Jin Okubo: Actually, fans of the series have been asking us to make an action game set in the Soulcalibur world for years. The desire to give the fans what they wanted, as well as the possibility of expanding the Soulcalibur franchise, were the two main reasons why we decided to develop Soulcalibur Legends.

Do you think trying to make a series aimed at the hardcore gamer market accessible to casual gamers will succeed?
Well, the concept of the Wii is a game system anyone can enjoy. With Soulcalibur, we wanted to make a game in the series a wider audience could play. By switching the genre to action, people can have fun without having to remember all sorts of complicated moves–you can attack just by swinging the Wii Remote around like a sword. However, that doesn't mean Legends is a simple game. By using the remote and Nunchuk, players can enjoy a wide variety of play styles, and various new styles of play will become apparent as they get better. It's actually a game with a lot of depth.

What can we expect in terms of player characters? Will they all be from previous Soul series games, or are there newcomers as well?
We're still promoting the game so I can't go into too much detail, but Legends is set during the gap between the original Soul Blade and Soulcalibur. The characters from that time period are the main characters here, although there are many new ones designed to fill story roles during the quest.

Siegfried is featured prominently in the Legends promotional material, but if the game is set post-Soul Blade, wouldn't he have already become Nightmare?
Legends is actually set directly before Siegfried becomes Knightmare. In the official chronology, Siegfried takes the cursed sword Soul Edge at the end of Soul Blade and becomes Nightmare, and this game will explain why that transformation occurred.

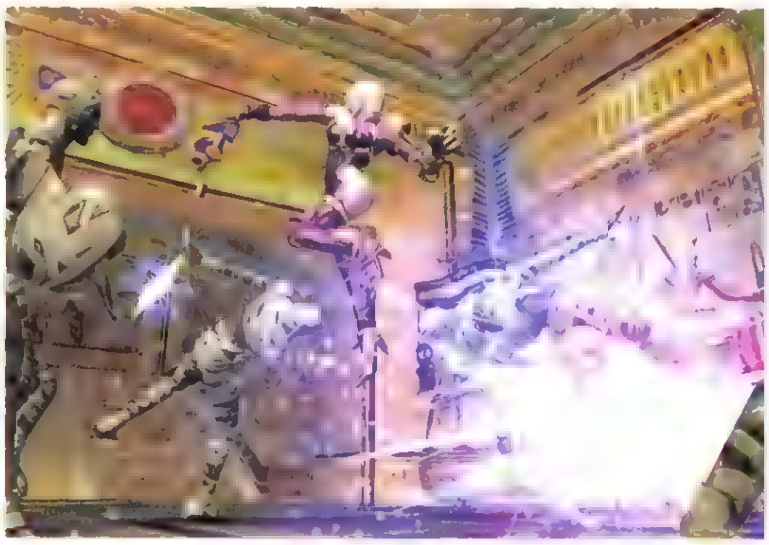
Would you say this is a story with a tragic ending, then?
The ending does have to connect to games further on in the timeline, so... (laughs) But I think you might be surprised.

The floor demo control seemed very simple. Is there any use of the pointer, or will motions required for moves become more elaborate as the game progresses?
We aren't thinking about anything requiring pointing right now. I think when most people pick up this game for the first time they'll say, "I don't understand what's going on here, but I'll just try waving my arms." Even with just that, you'll be able to feel good and produce attacks. Of course, in the floor demo not every move is unlocked, but you can try things like using the Nunchuk to dash in close for an attack, or fill up your gauge to use a special move, or even swing both the remote and Nunchuk simultaneously to use a secret attack. As you get stronger in the game you'll learn more moves, and each character has their own special abilities unique to them. Even if you shake in only one direction–let's say left, left, left–by changing the rhythm of your strokes you can produce different attacks. There are tons of hidden moves like this, so we hope friends will talk to each other about them and trade information about what they've learned.

> "...fans of the series have been asking us to make an action game set in the Soulcalibur world for years."

There are moves that aren't listed in the game? You have to find them by yourself?
There is, of course a tutorial, but the concept "the player can shake the remote any way he wants to" was very important during the development of this game, and as such there's a tremendous amount of moves. If we tried to explain every single one it would be far too complicated, so we hope the player will learn them himself as he progresses.

Was it very difficult arriving at the final control scheme? Other developers have told us about extensive input tests they did with the Wii remote for their games.
We certainly did, too. It took a lot of time. At the Soulcalibur team we've always paid a huge amount of attention to controller input, because it makes or breaks a fighting game. That's all a player has to



interact with, the buttons. We make sure things as simple as running around and single button presses for an attack feel good to execute. Our first imperative with the Wii remote was to make something that felt good to play. No matter how great your control scheme was, if it didn't perform exactly as you imagined it would, it would be a total disappointment. Initially, we did a great deal of technical research into the controller. Only after we were satisfied we'd be able to produce something gamers would be happy with did we begin actual development. With a digital controller, you can safely predict how people will use it, but with the Wii remote, everyone's going to shake it in a different way. Some will shake it with force, others without. Some will naturally put an angle into their swing, some won't. It took a long time to tune this input recognition aspect, making sure a thrust would differentiate from a swing, et cetera, et cetera.

What is the framework of the quests like? The Soul series is renowned for its adventure modes, in which you travel around a world map collecting weapons. Would you say Legends is an expansion of that?
Somewhat. You can certainly collect a wide variety of weapons. The main Soul series is fighting games, so we were limited as to the type of weapons we could feature–the game had to stay balanced. Since Legends is an action game, our weapon attributes are now much more varied. For instance, we now have elemental weapons with the power of fire, or ice. Each weapon can then be individually leveled up. There's also more freedom than the adventure modes in previous games, since you play with multiple characters. You might face a situation that would be difficult as Mitsurugi, but easier with Taki. The combination of what character to use, combined with what weapon, is actually very strategic and that aspect is very different from previous Soulcaliburs.

Would you say the player will become unable to stick with his or her favorite character and be forced to change depending on the stage?
Probably so. You'll want to change your character and weapon based on the stage you're playing. Of course, you can always take your favorite character along, too, but actually control the one most suited to that particular level.

Will the selection of character change the story in any way?
The main story revolves around Siegfried and the events surrounding his life and has a defined structure.

Is it totally linear, or are there optional subquests?
We're not really ready to say (laughs). But I think you can look forward to something!

The cooperative, party-style play looks like it will be a lot of fun. Have you considered online co-op?
Right now, online is ..what can I say (laughs). I'm afraid there's nothing I can say. A lot of people who've played Legends have expressed their desire to play it online, and many of our team members feel the same way. It's something we'd like to think about for possible future games.

One of my personal favorite aspects of the Soulcalibur series has always been the music. I know the main composer for the series, Junichi Nakatsuru, is working on IV, but is he providing music for Legends as well?
Well, if you're a fan of Mr. Nakatsuru's, I think if you listen to Legends' music, you'll probably be pretty happy (laughs).

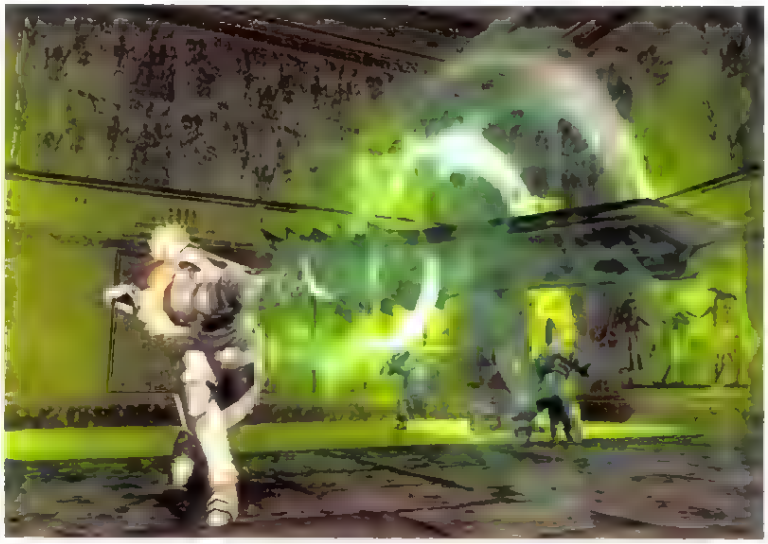
I also liked very much how previous games have allowed you to switch between English and Japanese character voices. Will Legends allow you to do the same, or is there too much voice work involved?
I think you can look forward to that feature returning.

How long can we expect the game to take to complete? The one-player modes in the Soul series are known for being fairly meaty...
It's still a bit too early in development to say for sure, but I think there will be more than enough total playtime for an action game. It's different from standard action games, too–you're going to be moving around physically so much you'll probably get tired sooner and have to take a break after a few stages. We're aiming for a game that will leave the player satisfied when they've completed it. As you gradually move up from simply shaking the remote to learning individual moves, we hope the player will develop a, how should I say, a feeling of pleasant tiredness, or fulfillment when they're done. I think this game might actually become stressful if it were too long, so we're still determining exactly the right balance.

> "..with the Wii remote, everyone's going to shake it in a different way."

Soulcalibur IV will be released following Legends. Although it takes place much later in the chronology, will there be any story links to IV?
Since Legends connects Soul Blade and Soulcalibur, there are no direct links. That's in the future. I do think there's a possibility for future works connecting other games in the series, however. But not in Legends.

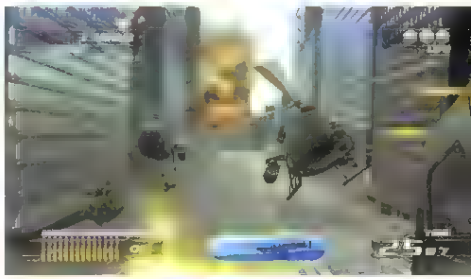
Any final words for American Soulcalibur fans?
We've finally been able to show something resembling the final product here at TGS. Going into the last stages of development, we've increased the quality significantly, but there were many worries we'd be able to make something fun and worth playing. Having come this far, I can definitely say we've done that. When you play Soulcalibur Legends, I know you'll come away with the impression that it's definitely Soulcalibur. I hope both longtime fans and people new to the series will enjoy it.



namco bandai cont.

Time Crisis 4

I have to admit, Time Crisis 4 was not exactly on my radar before TGS. Although I've loved gun shooting games since I was a wee lad playing Hogan's Alley at the corner liquor store, something about the prospect of an arcade game that ran on PlayStation 2-derived hardware ported to PS3 rubbed me the wrong way. Once I got my hands on the magnificent GunCon 3, however, I could do nothing but tremble before its might. It's like this: GunCon 3 is the best light gun ever made. Similar to Nintendo's Wii Zapper "peripheral" in concept but infinitely better in execution, the GunCon 3 incorporates a pointer tracked with not one but *two* light sensors (for accuracy in HD resolutions), along with two analog pads and six digital buttons. The left analog stick is positioned in a Wii Nunchuk-esque "sub grip" that feels totally natural, as does your right thumb resting on the second analog. While holding it in my hands and playing the substantially graphically enhanced arcade mode, I realized how perfect this setup would be for an FPS. Much to my amazement, Namco already had me covered. The main draw of Time Crisis 4 is not its overhauled arcade mode, but an original 15-stage FPS mode designed to function in tandem with the main story. While not as gobsmackingly pretty as most high-end Western FPSs, it is more than a suitable testing ground for the GunCon 3, and the lack of visual fidelity almost doesn't matter with the peripheral in your hands. Time Crisis 4 controls like a dream, and if every single FPS/TPS for the PS3 doesn't have support for the GunCon 3 in 2008, I'll be shocked and disappointed. It's that good.



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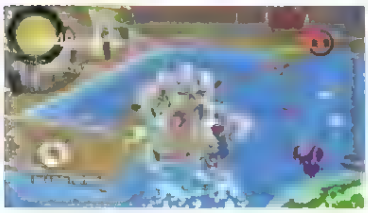


snk playmore

The King of Fighters XII, The King of Fighters Maximum Impact Regulation "A" 2, and Samurai Spirits Sen

We're wasting this much space on logos? Yeah. You bet. Take a look at those titles. KOFMI: Regulation "A" 2 aside, which is just another arcade update to the tepidly-received 3-D version of the KOF series, these games represent the first all-new entries in their respective series in ten years. We're talking no recycled sprites. No recycled moves. *All new*. For the lifelong fighting game enthusiast, it's almost too much to bear. Series producer Falcoon promises that KOF XII will be hand-drawn from scratch in high resolution, and Samurai Spirits Sen is a grounds-up reboot of the series in full 3-D, running on Taito's Type X line of high-end, PC-based arcade hardware. We haven't seen a single frame of footage, but we're hyped. And you should be too.

Metal Slug 7

The Metal Slug train keeps on chuggin'! Original developers Nazca may be long gone, but SNK Playmore proved with Metal Slug 6 that they can still make a damn fine side-scrolling action shooter (let's all just pretend 4 and 5 never happened). Surprisingly, the latest entry in the series is being crafted exclusively for the Nintendo DS—and that's just fine. The system is considerably more powerful than the original Neo Geo, and nobody complained about Metal Slugs 1-3, right? Right. Perhaps *not* surprisingly for the series, MS7 runs at the series' traditional 30fps and is replete with massive asset recycling: Virtually every sprite, weapon and background we saw was from a previous game in the series. That's just fine with us, too. Metal Slug 7 was clearly very early, but the mere knowledge it's coming makes me want to equip my Rocket Launchair and sing.

microsoft

Lost Odyssey

"...it was quite a surprise to find no playable version of the game at the show."

Lost Odyssey is scheduled to go gold in three short weeks, so it was quite a surprise to find no playable version of the game at the show. According to Global Product Manager Hees Kyung, everyone was simply too busy with their deadline crunch to put together a playable demo, so the game's public debut has been delayed until a November 19 Premier Event that will also feature a concert by composer Nobuo Uematsu. Hrmph. I'm a little bitter about not getting to play my #1-Most-Wanted Xbox 360 title, but a series of guided demos and a beautiful new trailer (available on Xbox Live Marketplace) have helped to soften the blow.

Lost Odyssey is the tale of Kaim, an immortal who has lived for a thousand years but doesn't remember why. He isn't the only one – a trio of immortal ladies will join him on his quest, as will a handful of soft, chewy mortals. The interplay between mortals and immortals lies at the heart of the game, as the only way for immortal characters to remember their forgotten skills and spells is by watching mortal allies use them in battle. Skills and abilities can also be learned from a character's ring, which can be infused with elemental properties that act as the equivalent to Blue Dragon's character classes. Among the ring bonuses is an extra splash of elemental damage that you can trigger with a well-timed button press whenever you land a physical attack.

A defeated immortal will rise again in a few turns, but you can still Game Over if your party is all down at once—which is exactly what happened to creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, during his on-stage demo. It was a humorous moment, and a hopeful sign for anyone praying that Lost Odyssey will be more challenging than Blue Dragon was. Kyung couldn't promise selectable difficulty settings, but said that Sakaguchi was "well aware" of the complaints about Blue Dragon's lack of difficulty from western gamers. Does that mean we'll get a harder version than the Japanese? Not a chance—every region's version of Lost Odyssey will be exactly the same, each containing the same game code and the same nine (!) selectable localizations in a four-DVD set. The only difference is the release date: Western versions ship in February, two months after the Japanese version's December 6 release.

Hironobu Sakaguchi has described his vision for Lost Odyssey as a game in which story events trigger frequently, but battles are relatively rare. The random encounter rate in our guided demo was absurdly high (like all aspects of game balance, that is being heavily tweaked), but there is no doubt that the story is the game's driving force. As you play through the game's main storyline (written by Sakaguchi himself), you'll unlock chapters of a supplemental novella penned by award-winning Japanese writer Kiyoshi Shigematsu. These installments concern the events of Kaim's past, so forward-focused players are free to skip them and review them later (the unlocked chapters are accessible from the game's title screen). Mistwalker insists at the Final Fantasy comparisons, but it's clear that fans of story-driven RPGs like Final Fantasy X will find an awful lot to appreciate in Lost Odyssey.

microsoft cont.

Ninja Gaiden II

Microsoft's big Ninja Gaiden II reveal was spoiled when shots leaked early on the Internet, but the game's guided demo still dropped jaws with its speed and brutality. We sat down with Director Katsunori Ehara and Assistant Producer Yoshifuru Okamoto from Team Ninja to discuss their new gory yet casual-friendly development philosophy.

Interview with Director Katsunori Ehara and Assistant Producer Yoshifuru Okamoto from Team Ninja

Interview by Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Daiki Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: Can you explain the new healing system?

Team Ninja: The reputation the first game had for being difficult was something that was discussed a lot amongst the team. This [new system] is one of our solutions.. Every time you get hit a certain percentage of the damage is permanent, and the rest can be regained. When you go to a save point you can get it all back. We also feel that it's anachronistic to have someone go into the menu whenever they want to heal themselves with a potion, so we wanted to provide an alternative to that.

Are you aiming for an easier game so that a wider audience can enjoy it?

We wanted to make it possible for this game to be approachable to not only the same kind of hardcore fans that enjoyed the first, but also for more casual gamers, and that's why we wanted to include helpful systems to make the game a little more accessible. One thing that we do want to make clear is that we won't make the game easier by just dumbing down the enemies. We think the battles and the back-and-forth between your attacks and the enemy's attacks is what really makes Ninja Gaiden fun.

The demo seems focused heavily on the new scythe and claw weapons. Are you retiring the Dragon Sword?

You'll still start out with the Dragon Sword as you did originally, that's Ryu Hayabusa's signature weapon, so we're making a lot of improvements to that as well. However, we heard from a lot of people who played the first game that you only really needed the Dragon Sword to finish it. So we wanted to make sure the new weapons in Ninja Gaiden II are fun enough and powerful enough that you feel you can switch to them at any time.

Will it have a similar weapon upgrade system to the first?

Of course.

One of the common complaints about the first Ninja Gaiden was the camera system. Will you be handling that differently this time?

The camera is definitely one of the things we weren't happy with in the first game, even though a lot of people said it was one of the best action games ever. The camera was probably the biggest thing we wanted to change, and I think you can tell from looking at the demo that we made a lot of improvements, especially in the area of doing a lot of zooms and pans to show the action in a cool way. We're going to continue to work on it, but we think we're coming along well so far.

Obviously the gore factor has been increased significantly. Are there strategic aspects to hacking off certain limbs?

Violence has always been an important theme to the Ninja Gaiden series, but we had limitations in the original in terms of hardware power and things like that. In the second game we're trying to take the theme of violence and, as you said, add strategic elements to it, so it's not just violence and gore for its own sake. For instance, if you cut off an enemy ninja's leg, then he's basically crippled—he can never return home to the life he had before. So now his AI patterns are changed; even though he's crawling around on a stump he's looking to take you out, and if he can get close to Ryu he'll grab onto your leg and use a grenade to set off a suicide bomb. So the game is constantly changing enemy AI based on whether they've lost an arm or a leg.

Is that going to be a problem for your rating in Japan?

We know that it's going to be a Z rating, which is the highest rating that CERO can give out—18 and above. We're kind of pushing the envelope in terms of how far you can go with a Z rating, but we think the Japanese have a certain amount of tolerance for slashing action, because of historical samurai movies and things like that, so Japanese sword action with blood spurting out is maybe easier to swallow than other forms of violence.

> "Violence has always been an important theme to the NG series, but we had limitations in the original in terms of hardware power and things like that."

The stage-select screen shows everything from Japanese temples to the Statue of Liberty. Most of Ninja Gaiden took place in a single congruous area—will that not be the case this time?

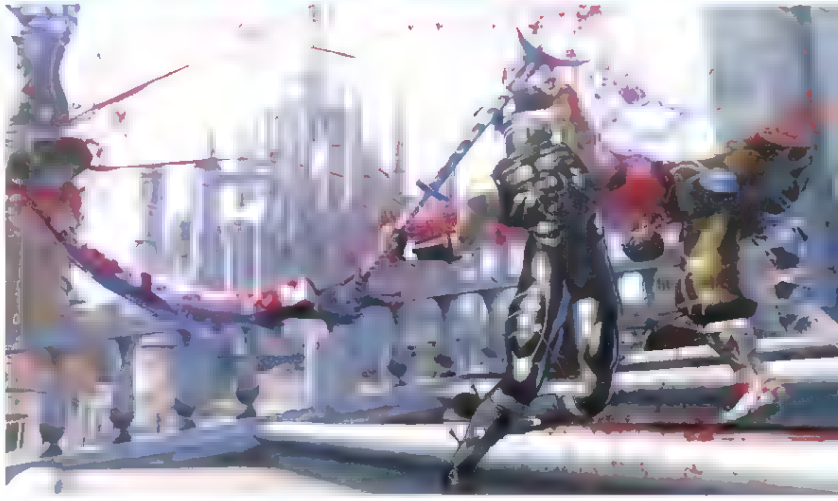
I think it was a good approach for Ninja Gaiden to have a setting with a consistent worldview, where you were going around to different places within a confined area. But for the second game we approached it from a stance of "where do we want to see Ryu fight?" So we came up with a story that has him visiting different cities around the world.

Can you tell us about the Xbox Live features?

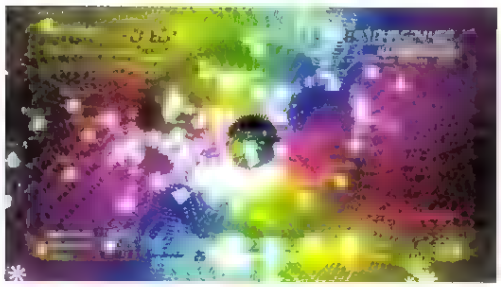
We're aware that online features are a huge part of the Xbox 360 platform, and we definitely want to include compelling features to support the Live community. However, we do not just want to go and say, "Okay, Game X has co-op play and Game Y has versus play, and therefore we have to include that." It's more an approach of thinking about what online features best suit Ninja Gaiden II, a story about a solitary ninja who goes around the world. So right now we're looking at all our options and what they allow us to do on Live, and what's the best way to support the Live community with this game.

The game looks to be coming along great. Can we narrow down that 2008 release date a bit?

(Laughs.) If we could, it would be up there on the screen!



Xbox Live Arcade



• Every Extend Extra Extreme

E4 looks lovely in 1080p resolution, and offers an impressive variety of play modes, including an additional 100-stage shooting mode. It should be out around the time you read this.

• Omega Five

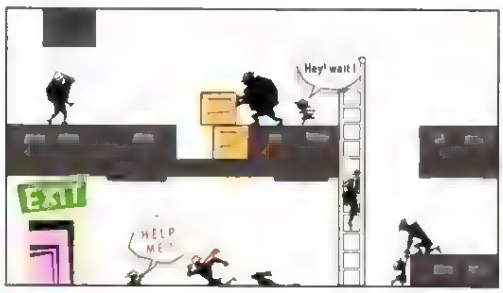
November brings us Omega Five, which is the only original title in the bunch. It's a scrolling shooter in the vein of Forgotten Worlds that supports 2-player local co-op and has four large stages and four selectable characters. It plays like a lost arcade relic from the '90s (in a good way), but with gorgeous next-gen graphics.

• Trigger Heart Exelica

Trigger Heart Exelica is an arcade overhead shooter that was released for the Dreamcast earlier this year and is now being remade with HD modes and a newly arranged soundtrack for XBLA. The Dreamcast version is already a $120 collector's item, but you'll be able to download an enhanced version for only $10 by the end of the year. (Although frankly, it's debatable whether it's worth even that.)

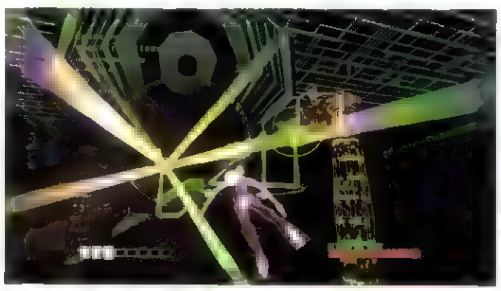
• Ikaruga

Here's one that is undeniably worth $10—Treasure's Ikaruga is probably the most acclaimed overhead shooter of the last decade. The XBLA version features online co-op, leaderboards and upgraded graphics, although to experience it at a proper HD resolution (as with Trigger Heart Exelica), you'll need to play it as a side-scroller or rotate your TV. Ikaruga will be available for download sometime this winter.



• EXIT

At some point we'll finally get this long-delayed Taito puzzler, which was originally released on the PSP to moderate acclaim. The initial XBLA release will feature 120 stages with additional level packs planned for the future.



• Rez HD

Yet another 2001 Dreamcast cult classic (also released on the PS2), Rez is an on-rails first-person shooter choreographed to music, and has benefited greatly from the leap to HD resolution and Dolby 5.1 sound. Sadly, no date beyond "2008" has been announced.

also shown

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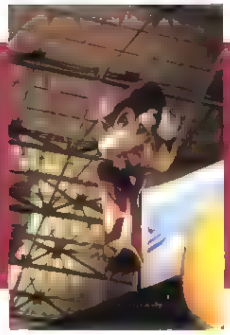


Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan!

Despite Yakuza's struggles in the states, the Ryu ga Gotoku series has been cranking out million-sellers in its native land. Screw Sonic—this is Sega's new flagship series and the stunning new Ryu ga Gotoku Kenzan! suggests it now has a budget to match.

Kenzan! takes the series 400 years into the past, where fallen samurai Kazuma Kiryunosuke acts as a bodyguard for high-class *oiran* prostitutes in Kyoto's legendary party-town of Gion. (Don't call them geisha—those hadn't been invented yet.) Kazuma's name comes straight from the hero of the original series, and he's not the only one—the cast includes 17th century versions of Detective Date, deranged killer Majima, and even little Haruka. In fact, in the game's 10-minute debut video it's Haruka that seems to be driving the plot. When Kazuma turns down her plea to perform a heroic deed, noting he's all about the money these days, she attempts instead to hire him to kill Miyamoto Musashi, Japan's most famous samurai. But in a not-so-historically accurate twist, Miyamoto Musashi is exactly who Kiryunosuke used to be. See, you're not just a garden-variety badass in Kenzan!—you're the greatest badass in the recorded history of Japan.

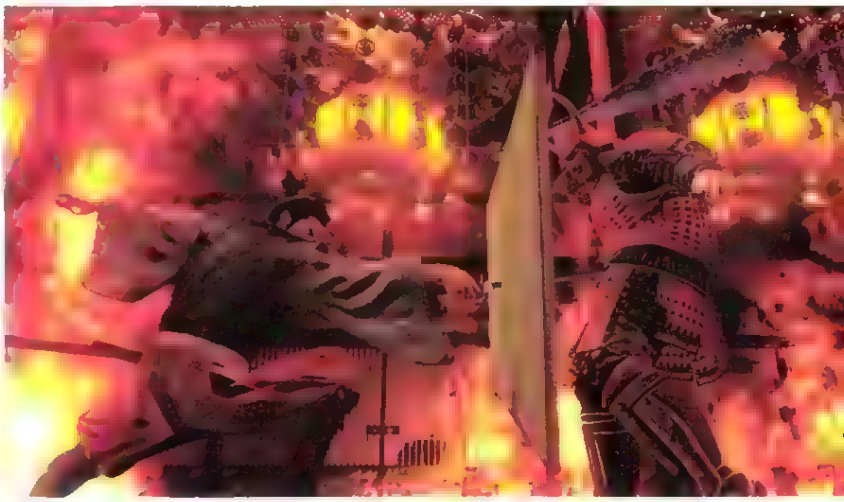
As such, you're gonna do a lot of killing in very cool ways. Kiryunosuke/Musashi can master four fighting arts: the fisticuffs of past installments plus single-sword, double-sword, and Odachi (great sword) styles. Of course, Musashi invented some of those styles, and he'll do the same in Kenzan!. By pursuing side quests and

> "...you're the greatest badass in the recorded history of Japan."

thoroughly exploring Gion you'll witness events, such as a dog leaping for a bone or a farmer being mauled by an ox, that will inspire Musashi to create new attacks. The Heat Actions finishing moves have also returned, and their entrails-rending brutality would have shocked us had Ninja Gaiden II not completely desensitized us to violence a few hours earlier.

The city of Gion has been re-created to the finest detail, and a new free camera system brings the Ryu ga Gotoku series one step closer to fulfilling Shenmue's promise of complete immersion in a digital world. Alas, forklift races didn't yet exist in 1605, so you'll have to kill time with period mini-games like shogi, mounted archery, and turtle racing, or try to chat your way into the pants—er, kimonos—of Gion's working ladies.

Kenzan! is going to sell a *lot* of PS3's in Japan, but its prospects in America look hazy at best. On the one hand, Yakuza did well enough that Sega is finally localizing its PS2 sequel (subtitled only, presumably). On the other hand, if the masses found the original Yakuza to be "too Japanese," one can only imagine how baffled they'll be by this one. But it would be a damn shame if American gamers never got the opportunity to race a turtle, bed a 17th century *oiran*, or rend a Kyoto street thug from neck to anus with a great sword.



Valkyrie of the Battlefield: Gallian Chronicles

At first glance, Valkyrie of the Battlefield looks like a traditional turn-based strategy game. You've got a hand-drawn battlefield map, some blue characters you control, and some red characters you must defeat. But when you select a unit, instead of choosing orders from a menu, the map smoothly morphs into a European city modeled and textured to look like a hand-drawn Hayao Miyazaki comic. You can then control your chosen character in semi-real-time—running up to a foe, trading a few shots, and then ducking behind cover before returning to the map screen.

The combination of a soulful story, imaginative play mechanics, and a striking new visual style is something we haven't seen from Sega since the glory days of the Saturn and Dreamcast. So we were pleased but not surprised when we sat down for our interview and found long-time Producer Ryutaro Nonaka and Skies of Arcadia writer Shuntaro Tanaka (now a Director) representing the team.

Producer Ryutaro Nonaka, Director Shuntaro Tanaka

Interview by Casey Loe and Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

Why did R&D 2 decide to do an original strategy game instead of a new Sakura Taisen?

Shuntaro Tanaka: We just wanted to do something new on a new platform–the PS3. Sakura Taisen isn't ending at all, it's still continuing with Oji Hiroi at the helm and with much of its original staff. We sort of branched off from the Sakura Taisen team for this new project.

Is the game based on actual World War II battles?

It takes place in an alternate, parallel world. There's a European continent and a Second World War taking place, but it's not the Europe we know.

Does that open the door to supernatural elements? We saw what looked like an actual Valkyrie in the game's trailer.

ST: Well, this touches upon the heart of the game's story, so I can't go into too much detail. The girl in the trailer with the lance and a shield is indeed a Valkyrie, and has special powers–she can thrust through tank armor with her lance, and defend against their shells with her shield. We want to pose questions like, "Is it right to use weapons of mass destruction to wage war? Will the peace that comes afterward be worth it?" I'm sorry for being so vague, but we haven't revealed the story yet. It is fantasy entertainment, but we want it to be grounded in reality.

Will the game have branching paths, or is it a linear sequence of missions?

ST: The amount of experience and other things you receive at the end of battle will change, but the main story itself does not have a lot of branches.

How long of a game are you aiming for?

ST: We're still tweaking the game balance, but I think I can say the main story will be at least thirty hours long. For people who want to do everything, that can probably be stretched out twenty or thirty more hours. I'd say it's a game with a lot of meat. Ryutaro Nonaka: There are plenty of hidden missions.

What inspired the game's unique visual aesthetic?

ST: Western games tend to be in one of two styles: Photorealistic, or at the other extreme, cel shaded. With the power of the PS3 platform, we wanted to try something totally different: something that felt like a hand-drawn illustration. With that intent in mind, we built an engine that could render distorted edges, like a freehand drawing, and purposely had some of the "color" within bleed beyond those edges. Objects in the far distance become blurred, looking like a watercolor painting.

Was that difficult to accomplish?

ST: It was really difficult! (laughs)

RN: It's *still* difficult! (laughs)

ST: No game has ever had this sort of look before, so there was nobody we could go to and ask for advice on how to implement it. In the end, I think we achieved most of what we wanted to achieve.

RN: There was no reference point for what we wanted it to look like, so we drew pencil art ourselves and brought it to the technical staff saying, "Program this!" (laughs)

> "Western games tend to be in one of two styles: Photorealistic, or at the other extreme, cel-shaded."

Was the art of Hayao Miyazaki a big influence?

ST: Yes, he's definitely an influence. In the

sega cont.

Valkyrie of the Battlefield: Gallian Chronicles

trailer you probably saw some of the giant war machines, the huge tanks, and things
RN: All the tanks bristling with cannons (laughs). It's not very realistic, but we were very influenced by his designs
ST: We think Miyazaki fans will probably really enjoy this game (laughs)

When the game switches to real-time, how action-intensive is it?
ST: Some parts of the game are controlled like a TPS, but in a pure action game the enemy is always shooting at you, and you have to be constantly dodging, right? You won't need that level of action game skill to enjoy Valkyrie
RN: Our focus is definitely on the tactics, the SRPG elements. You might say the action elements are a spice to add tension and exhilaration...it's not a hardcore action game by any means.

So you can take all the time you need to line up shots and such?
ST: Yes, but after you shoot, the enemy will fire back. Of course, if you manage to take the enemy out he won't be able to fire back, but if he's still alive he'll always counterattack
RN: After firing, if you're able to run away in time, you'll be able to avoid return fire. If you just stand there, though, you're going to get shot (laughs).
ST: Getting back to cover becomes an important skill.

How about during the enemy's turn? Do you have any control over your characters?
ST: If you're able to predict the enemy's movements and place troops in their way, during the enemy phase you'll be able to counterattack *them*. Sometimes this will happen automatically, but you are able to place traps.

Are tanks the only vehicles you can use?
ST: Tanks are a major theme of the game and the only vehicles you command, yes. You have two at the start, and they can be heavily customized. You might outfit your tank with gatling guns for rapid-fire attacks or give it the ability to fire one super-powerful shell, or build up its armor so you can get behind it and use it as a shield–it's all up to the player. Of course, each customization changes the tank's graphics. Enemies have a lot more vehicles to attack you with, like giant armored trains. It's pretty fun (laughs).

The trailer showed scenes of tanks plowing through buildings. Can you actually do that in the game?
ST: That particular shot from the trailer is a cut scene, but there are cases where you'll be able to destroy structures. You can even use your tanks to smash through trees, bunkers and walls. You can also blow obstacles up with grenades. With that said, although games like Gears of War are really popular in the West, Japanese users don't have a lot of familiarity with that military type of aesthetic. That's why we've chosen this type of graphics, and the more strategic approach to gameplay.
RN: Western games are all about ultra realistic graphics and kill-or-be-killed war situations right now. Of course, our game has aspects of that, but our heroes are just regular people. Our heroine wants to be a baker, and the hero is a university student. The focus of our drama is on these ordinary people faced with the realities of war.

The heroes aren't in the military?
ST: No, they're not
RN: They live in a small country, caught up in the war between a giant empire and a republic.
ST: A good real-world comparison would be Switzerland. In a country like that, faced with that situation, anyone over the age of 16 is forced to become a soldier. Even students

Are all of the characters like that?
ST: Yes, there's a master carpenter, a barmaid, lots of interesting characters.
RN: None of them are professional soldiers.
ST: When you get ten of these people in one unit ...everyone says what's on their mind (laughs). They aren't used to the rigid structure; they argue, they bicker, and then they fight alongside each other

Does every character have a storyline, or can you recruit vanilla units if you just need another body on the battlefield?
ST: Not every character is tied directly to the main story, but every character has their own name, background, and personality
RN: Every character has an original model and a unique voice actor. Everyone has their own special abilities too, so you'll get into situations where one map might become a lot easier if you bring along a certain character.
ST: Characters join you in many ways, for instance, you might liberate a town and one of its residents will ask to join you

Is it like Fire Emblem, where if a character dies they're gone forever?
ST: In Valkyrie, if a character's HP drops to zero, that character collapses. What you have to do is send one of your medics through the hail of bullets, because if you leave them lying there, eventually they'll truly die. This will never prevent you from beating the game, but you'll probably want to keep your favorite characters alive, right? But what if it's a situation where going back would prevent you from winning the map? We want to give the player that kind of thing to worry about. It's like one of those old war movies, one of the hero's buddies gets shot down, but says, "Don't worry about me! Keep going!"
RN: You want to go help them, but you might get shot too. Do you take the risk? Do you try? It'll be up to the player. . Kind of a *Saving Private Ryan* thing (laughs).

Were war movies a major inspiration for the game?
RN: We definitely watched a lot of war movies for research. *Saving Private Ryan, Band of Brothers, Letters From Iwo Jima, Flags of Our Fathers, Hamburger Hill*. .

> "We think Miyazaki fans will probably really enjoy this game."

Rather than war action movies, we were looking at really dramatic pieces with several well-drawn characters

Have you picked an official English title yet?
RN: Not yet. Honestly, the question of whether or not it will be released in Western markets is still undecided. Of course, we really want it to come out there.
ST: We sure do! (laughs)

Do you have a final message for our readers?
RN: With Valkyrie, I think we're making a really *new* game. Not just the graphics, but also the style of gameplay. I think we're breaking new ground. I really hope American and European fans will get the chance to play it soon
ST: First we have to get the Japanese version done, but we'll do our best to get it into the hands of Sega fans around the globe as soon as possible.

Shiren the Wanderer 3

All right, folks, history lesson. You may not have heard of him, but Koichi Nakamura has very likely influenced your life. A programming wunderkind in high school, his entry in a national game programming contest held in 1982 by a newly-formed software publisher called Enix won the top prize. The game was Door Door, a legendary action/puzzle/platform hybrid that has since been ported to countless platforms. Soon after forming his own game development company, Chunsoft, which he named after Door Door's protagonist, Nakamura met a young game designer named Yuji Horii. The rest, as they say, was history.

Dragon Quest: The game that gave birth to the JRPG genre in 1986. Though Horii gets the lion's share of the accolades and credit for the series belongs equally with Nakamura. He continued to personally handle development of the series at Chunsoft through to 1992's seminal Dragon Quest V, which many consider the final entry of the series' golden age.

But Nakamura did not rest on his laurels. Having helped to create one genre, he soon spearheaded two more. First came Otogirisou, the debut entry in the Sound Novel series of adventure games. Along with two later games in the series, Night of the Kamaitachi and Machi, it is frequently found on Japanese game magazines' top ten lists of all time. Following soon after was the Mystery Dungeon series of randomly-generated dungeon exploration games, which Western users are probably most familiar with in the guise of Pokémon Mystery Dungeon.

The core of the franchise, however, has always been Shiren the Wanderer–Western fans just didn't know it. Thanks to Sega, the blisteringly difficult series is finally coming to these shores, first in a remake of the original Shiren the Wanderer on Nintendo DS, then at some unspecified time in 2008, Shiren the Wanderer 3 on Wii. Play's Dai Kohama, a longtime fan of the series, sat down with Koichi Nakamura to talk about its American debut.

"You may not have heard of him, but Koichi Nakamura has very likely influenced your life."

Interview with Koichi Nakamura, Director, Shiren the Wanderer 3

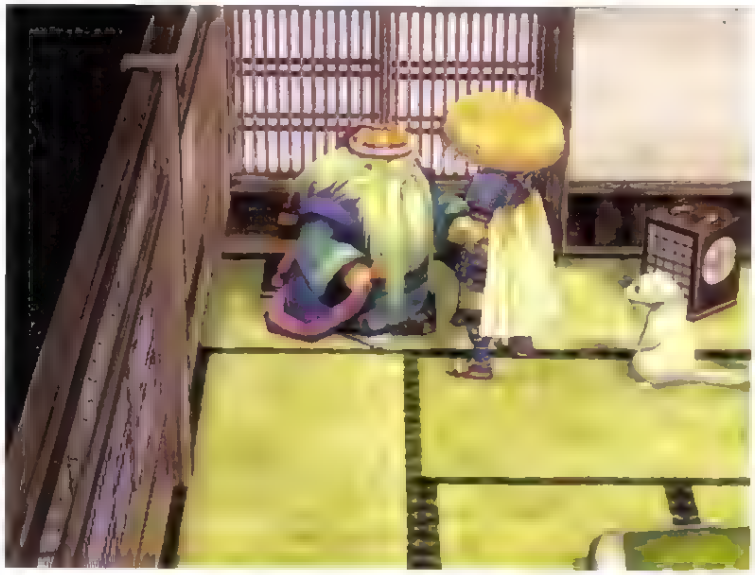
Interview by Dai Kohama / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: Most of our readers are probably unfamiliar with the Shiren series, but I hope you'll let me approach this interview from the perspective of the longtime fan. First I'd like to ask, why did you decide on Wii for Shiren 3?

Koichi Nakamura: Well, the first game was on the Super Famicom, and the second on the Nintendo 64. The series has always been on Nintendo systems, and right now the Wii was also the easiest platform to develop for. That was important.

It's not the type of game that would seem to benefit from motion control.

We did experiment with many control schemes, but, ...what should I say, I think at its core, Shiren is a very pure, logical game that was designed with the Super Famicom controller in mind. That hasn't changed. The most stress-free and pleasant way to play this game will definitely be with the Classic Controller, though you can use the Wii Remote if you want to.



It's been seven years since Shiren 2 on the Nintendo 64. What made you want to revive the franchise?

There hasn't been a Shiren, but as you know, we have made several other Mystery Dungeon games at Chunsoft–the Torneko and Pokemon series. We're very particular about all of them, but especially Shiren. ...with this series, the new gameplay ideas are very important. Even if they don't exactly match with the setting of the game, we always place priority on new and fun innovations to the genre with Shiren. In this case, working on so many other Mystery Dungeons, it took a good long while for the idea to arrive (laughs).

Tell us about that new idea. I assume you're referring to the new "Tool Growth System"?

Yes. It's the new feature we've worked the

sega cont.

Shiren the Wanderer 3

hardest on. In earlier games you could combine items in pots, and although that's still in 3, the new system centers around leaving items at certain spots in dungeons for a number of turns. Depending on where it's placed, equipment might simply get stronger, or receive new attributes entirely. Of course, you don't just set them down and wait, you have to defend them from enemies as well. Our original idea was based around planting seeds in a garden, but it seemed too simple, so it became "planting" weapons and tools in dungeons and waiting for them to sprout (laughs).

One of the most impressive things about the Mystery Dungeon series, and Shiren in particular, is its incredibly challenging–yet fair–difficulty level. Is balancing them a very arduous task?
At Chunsoft we have a...what should I say, a balance sensei (laughs). We have a guy named Mr. Nagahata who's balanced every Mystery Dungeon game we've made. He's like a human computer, his head is full of numbers (laughs). Also, our staff are all huge Mystery Dungeon fans themselves. When development nears its end, we all play the game and become aware of several different play styles. Some people rush to the next staircase to get to the next floor, some people search every floor from end to end. What's easy for one person is incredibly hard for another. Mr. Nagahata listens to all their opinions and basically balances the game himself.

Is Koichi Sugiyama [ed. note–composer of the Dragon Quest series, 76 years old] returning to do the music?
Not every track this time, but he's composing the most important ones. All the others are being overseen by him, with the composition being handled by a colleague of his who's been working with Mr. Sugiyama for years.

The original Shiren the Wanderer 1, originally for Super Famicom, was recently announced for Western release on the Nintendo DS. It will be the first Shiren game ever released in English. Will you follow it up with 2 on DS to bridge the gap?
Well, we...I wonder how much I can say (laughs)?

Sega Liaison: That depends on how well Shiren 3 sells on Wii (laughs).

You used Akiman, the famous ex-Capcom designer of Chun-Li, Cammy, Morrigan and countless other beloved characters for the illustration work on the DS version of Shiren 1. Are you a fan?
That was actually a request from the original character designer. He's a huge fan of Akiman's work and really respects him. I'd always wanted to work with him, myself.

I was really impressed with the DS game; it's not just a straight port. The rescue mechanic was a brilliant use of the system's Wi-Fi.
We knew we wanted to do something with Wi-Fi from the beginning. The rescue mechanic itself was actually something we experimented with for the GameBoy Shiren spinoffs, many years ago. You could hook up your GameBoys with the link cable and rescue your friends who had died in a dungeon, but very few people actually had the cable and used it. The other option we had was for rescue via password, and this was just when the internet was really taking off in Japan–I was amazed by everyone swapping passwords on the net to get people to come rescue them. I realized this was something essential that could really work with Wi-Fi.

> "Currently we are looking into a line of life-size armor replicas and high-end large-scale display figures."

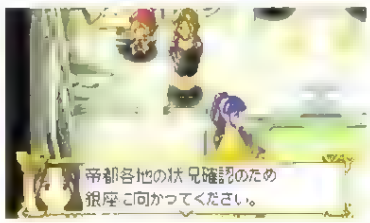
Have you thought about using the Wi-Fi connection abilities between the Wii and DS for something similar?
That sort of inter-system connectivity is something that often comes up at production meetings, but it's always a question of schedule–we're rarely developing two games close enough together to plan something like that.

Mystery Dungeon has gone from the original Dragon Quest spinoff, to Shiren, to Chocobos, and most recently to Pokémon. Is it a game style you think can apply to any franchise? Do you want to keep expanding it?
No, I think we're done for now. Definitely done (laughs).

Next, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask a little about you, Mr. Nakamura. Many Americans may not have heard your name, but you created three genres of video games–the JRPG together with Yuji Horii on Dragon Quest, the Sound Novel with Otogirisou, and the Mystery Dungeon style of dungeon exploration games. Do you consider these genres your life's work?
They've sort of become my life's work (laughs). I've been making these games for a long time.

Do you ever want to strike out into another genre entirely, or create a fourth?
I certainly do want to, but for whatever reason it never seems to happen... (laughs).

Finally, if you have a message for American gamers curious about the Mystery Dungeon series...
I think the Pokemon Dungeon series of games really opened a lot of eyes to our Mystery Dungeon genre. The latter half of those games gets fairly hard, and if you enjoyed that, Shiren on DS and Shiren 3 on Wii have much, much more difficult challenges to offer you. Shiren is the original, core Mystery Dungeon series, so I hope you'll try it out.



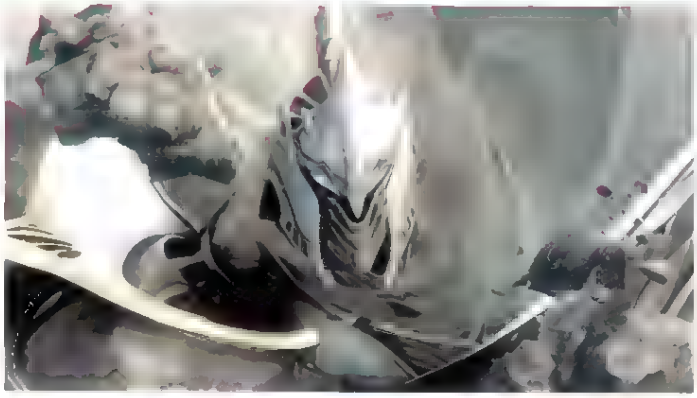
also shown

White Knight Story

At last year's Tokyo Games Show the trailer that caught my attention was White Knight Story. As developers promised that everything we were seeing was "in game, my mind raced in an effort to deconstruct what was seeing Battles looked physical, brutal, and weighty; a stab with a sword was met with a full-body-response by the defender. It looked like real incomprehensible physics

Turned out, this target build was a little too good to be true White Knight Story was the first game I tried at TGS 2007, and what we saw in last year's trailer was not what we got in playable form The battle system of White Knight is like action-lag By pre-programming combos (cycling through menus before a fight to set up a chain of attacks), players are essentially using rhythm-action techniques to battle enemies Press the button at the right moment to link to the next swing, and the enemy staggers in similar ways each time Not the dynamic, unfathomable thing we were shown last year.

If not for the hype of the trailer, White Knight would have been pretty great Tiny additions like customizable side-characters round out the game and the transformation between the tiny hero and the White Knight looks like it was storyboarded by Gainax (it's not) With a little polish, maybe Level-5 (Gaming's Next Big Thing) will pull off something that looks like last year's trailer, but real playability is limited as of now



Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

With fifty cars and five different courses, interior cockpit views and car damage (finally), Gran Turismo 5 Prologue is the first time I've been excited about GT games in a long while As you know from screenshots, the game looks nauseatingly real The cars are beyond uncanny, and now come off like cold video footage The sound of the engines varies depending on your distance from the vehicle; I'm talking about a different noise inside the car, as the roar is filtered through the chassis, dashboard, steering-wheel, and your virtual arms. Sit inside the car, and each one is lovely rendered with you'll-never-be able-to-afford-this specificity, right down to the mirrors

What you may not know is that it runs at 1080p, and Polyphony is aiming at 60fps. Normally, this kind of tech stuff doesn't matter to me, but with a game like GT5.P, the devil is in the details Speaking of details, there's no word on whether this absurdly deep demo is going to make it to the states. For once, Europe is the Sony darling, as both an EU and Japan download will be available at the PlayStation store. A Blu-Ray version will also be released, with additional content to justify the additional cost

Man, Gran Turismo games are unforgiving stuff. They make me feel like I don't know how to drive a car at all

sony cont.

Afrika

What the hell is Afrika? A year after its announcement, we still have absolutely no idea. What we do know is that the new TGS video of the game. I guess it's a game, right?...revealed the most life like, jaw-dropping realtime renditions of African flora and fauna ever to be modeled with triangles. Subtle details like the breeze delicately massaging the deep grass of the savannah, light filtering through the foliage overhead, and realistically-fuzzy lion fur combined with more spectacular sights like hundreds of zebra stampeding across vast plains to impress showgoers. What *might* be considered a hint at a

gameplay mechanic was also shown in the trailer. There were fleeting glimpses offered of human characters making their way amongst the wildlife clutching cameras. Is Afrika nothing more than a glorified Pokémon Snap? I wish I could tell you. Perhaps, some day, we will know.

Patapon

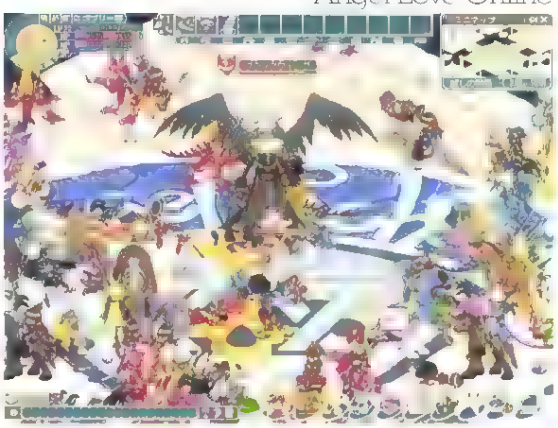
Love it or hate it (just so the score is clear, I fall strongly on the former side), nobody can deny Sony's Loco Roco was something radically *different*. The team responsible for that wonderfully silly game will soon be back with another PSP title, also from *far* left field, also sporting gameplay comprised of the most minimal of button inputs. Square is "Pata." Circle is "Pon." To summon your miniature army of on-screen freaks of nature (for there is simply no other way to describe this game's denizens) to move, you must type out combos to the beat: "Pata, pata, pata, pon." To attack, the combination is "Pon

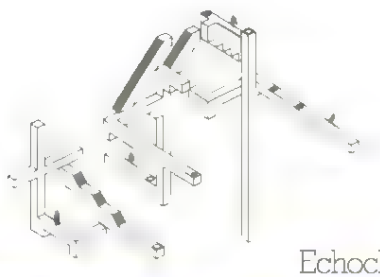
pon, pata, pon." As the game progresses, other combos with different functions, some involving the Triangle button, or "Chaka," will come into play. Simple. Crazy. Relentlessly addictive. Thoroughly Japanese. I'm there day one.

PlayStation Network Medley

What Microsoft's downloadable game suite packed in terms of big names and wow factor, Sony made up for with sheer innovation. Don't get me wrong, Rez in HD and 2-D shooters are fantastic, but I just might prefer the off-the-beaten path approach Sony seems to be taking with its online offerings. Debuting at the show were five new PSN titles: Angel Love Online, AQUA, Echochrome, Flower, and Toy Home. Angel Love Online is a completely free-to-play, minimalistic 2-D MMORPG. AQUA is as opaque as Afrika, but appears to be a gorgeous deep-sea life simulator. Echochrome, shown on video at E3 and also slated to be released on PSP, has revealed itself to be one of the most innovative puzzle games in recent memory, dropping you in M.C. Escher-inspired 3-D spaces, requiring extensive manipulation of the camera to proceed. Flower presented another imponderable Sony enigma, offering only waves of undulating grass dotted with the occasional brightly colored flower as clues to solving its mystery. Finally, Toy Home was refreshingly accessible: A miniature racing game in the spirit of Sony's own long-forgotten Motor Toon Grand Prix. I may have no idea what half of these games are, but I know I'm intrigued.

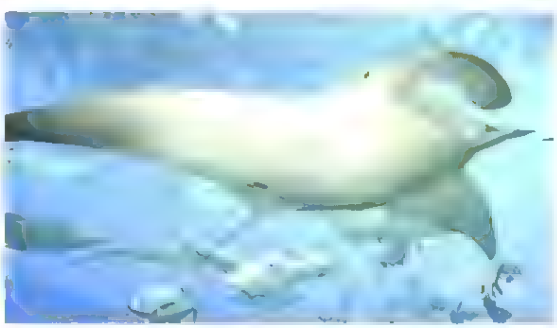
Angel Love Online

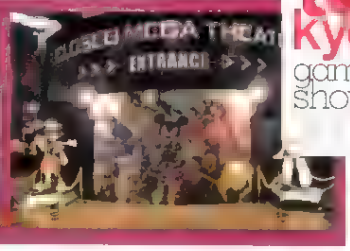




Echochrome

Toy Home





Infinite Undiscovery

One thing is for certain: there's a lot left to discover about Infinite Undiscovery. As hungry as we were for details about tri-Ace's upcoming original IP, the team remained tight-lipped about content, design, and style of their "next-gen" RPG. Director Hiroshi Ogawa and Producer Hajime Kojima sat down for an hour to talk about their big game, and after an hour, we're still desperate.

What we know from the trailers is this: the moon is in chains. A villain has enslaved the entire moon, stealing its lunar energy and denying the people of Infinite Undiscovery access to its power. A hero will rise to stop this crafty evil, by breaking the chains that bind the moon to the planet. And apparently, you play as someone who looks just like that hero.

Can't get much vaguer than that. For starters, what does Infinite Undiscovery even mean? Said Ogawa, "Over the course of the game, players will discover many things that are hidden, and these things will have an impact. There's basically an infinite number of undiscovered things in the world." Hence, Infinite Undiscovery.

Well, I'm infinitely confused.

Battles in the game are seamlessly integrated into the world map, with no transition between exploration and combat. Though the battle scheme is not unlike Star Ocean 3, three of the four party members are controlled with AI – we're guessing with a system like FFXII's Gambits, since the system can be changed on the fly. Other than the AI, combat is pretty traditional, but "there are certain things you can add to weapons and combine with magic that affect the play," said Kojima, remaining infinitely frustrating.

Additionally, "while in battle you'll see huge things in the field – large monsters, and large tsunamis that affect the situation and how battle plays out," smiled Kojima.

Tsunamis? Could it be that the course of battle is altered by the moon? "The tsunamis are linked to the proximity of the moon," said Ogawa. "As the people derive their power from the moon, it has an effect on them as well, so the environment does come to affect the world in many ways." Yet another infinitely undefined answer.

Still, it's not like the game is in inexperienced hands. The director, Hiroshi Ogawa, was the main planner on Star Ocean 3, and he was also involved in Star Ocean 2 and Valkyrie Profile. Music is handled by Motoi Sakuraba, composer for all tri-Ace games. And Producer Kojima has been involved with everything since Star Ocean 3.

square enix cont.

...Infinite Undiscovery

Beyond just the content of the game, the visual look s overhauled with a f lm l ke filter. Ogawa hinted, "One of the major features of the new eng ne is what we ca l a *film simulator*; it br ngs out brighter colors and enhances the sense of depth perception."

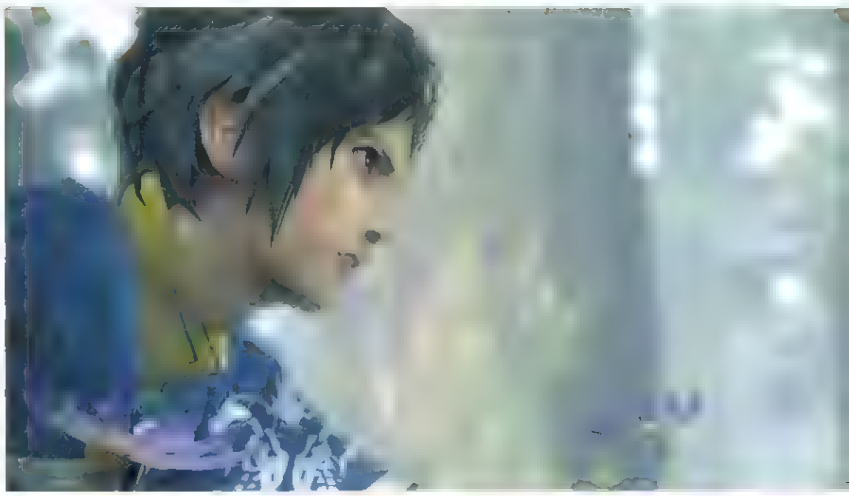
Perhaps th s depth will come into play w th large visible areas. Indeed, there's no world map n Inf nite Undiscovery. Desp te the fact that "the size of the fields [is] much larger than Star Ocean 3," according to Ogawa, "there won't be load.ng so much, [on y] n very few places."

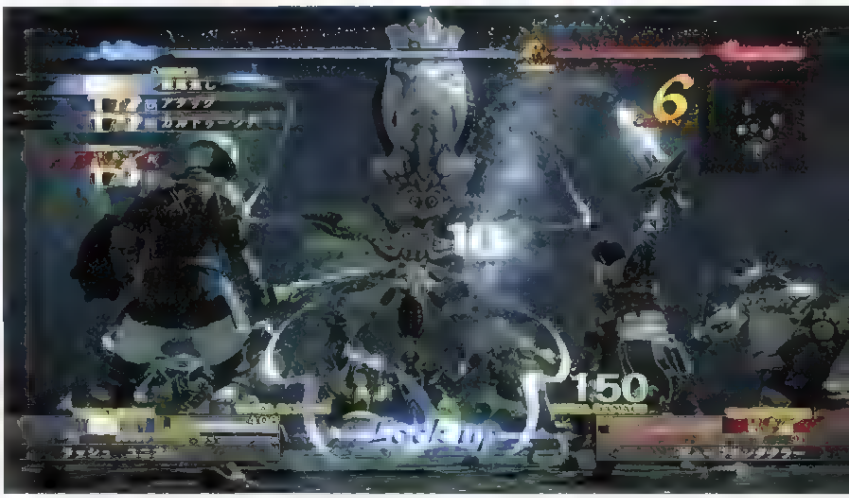
Obviously, IU is be ng released on a system that doesn't have the largest user base in Japan. How does this affect the design choices of a Japanese game? "It s be ng cons dered on a worldwide scale, so naturally there are certa n Japanese des gn e ements such as the shapes of the characters and things ike that, but it's based more on the maker and not the market," said Ogawa. "While we do consider what users in d fferent areas will appreciate, it's more about doing what we want to do than pleas ng particular people."

A vision that is nfinitely conf dent What t *means*, exactly, is und scovered

Last Remnant

he Last Remnant wasn't shown at Square's booth, but Execut ve Producer Ak toshi Kawazu took the stage at Microsoft's press event to show off a few minutes of new footage from the X360 version. Mr. Kawazu was ooking hale and hearty, which I'm cal ing a bad s gn—he's got four versions of The Last Remnant to sh p simu taneously (Japanese and English versions on both next-gen platforms) and f they were coming anytime soon he wou d surely look like a thoroughly broken man The 70-man battlefield brawls are look ng smoother and even more detailed than before, but the focus of the new trai er was the game's story In addition to high-spirited hero R sh and his k dnapped s ster Elena, it ntroduced David Nassau, a 19 year-old feuda lord who actually w elds one of the Remnants. His is an ornate laser cannon that can lay waste to an opposing army, which should g ve you some idea why these ancient weapons are at the heart of the world's conflicts. The tra ler also provided our first look at the Conqueror, the en gmatic figure designed specifically to appea to Amer can tastes Indeed, The Conqueror is a tota badass that has more appeal in his weathered face than all the game's pretty-boy heroes combined. Curse you, market researchers—get out of my soul!





Final Fantasy IV

When Square Enix announced Final Fantasy IV for DS, we assumed they'd dust off the FFIII engine, cram in an extra dungeon or two, and then lean back and count the 5000-yen bills. But no one is resting on their laurels here—the TGS demo revealed the most dramatic overhaul we've ever seen in an FF remake.

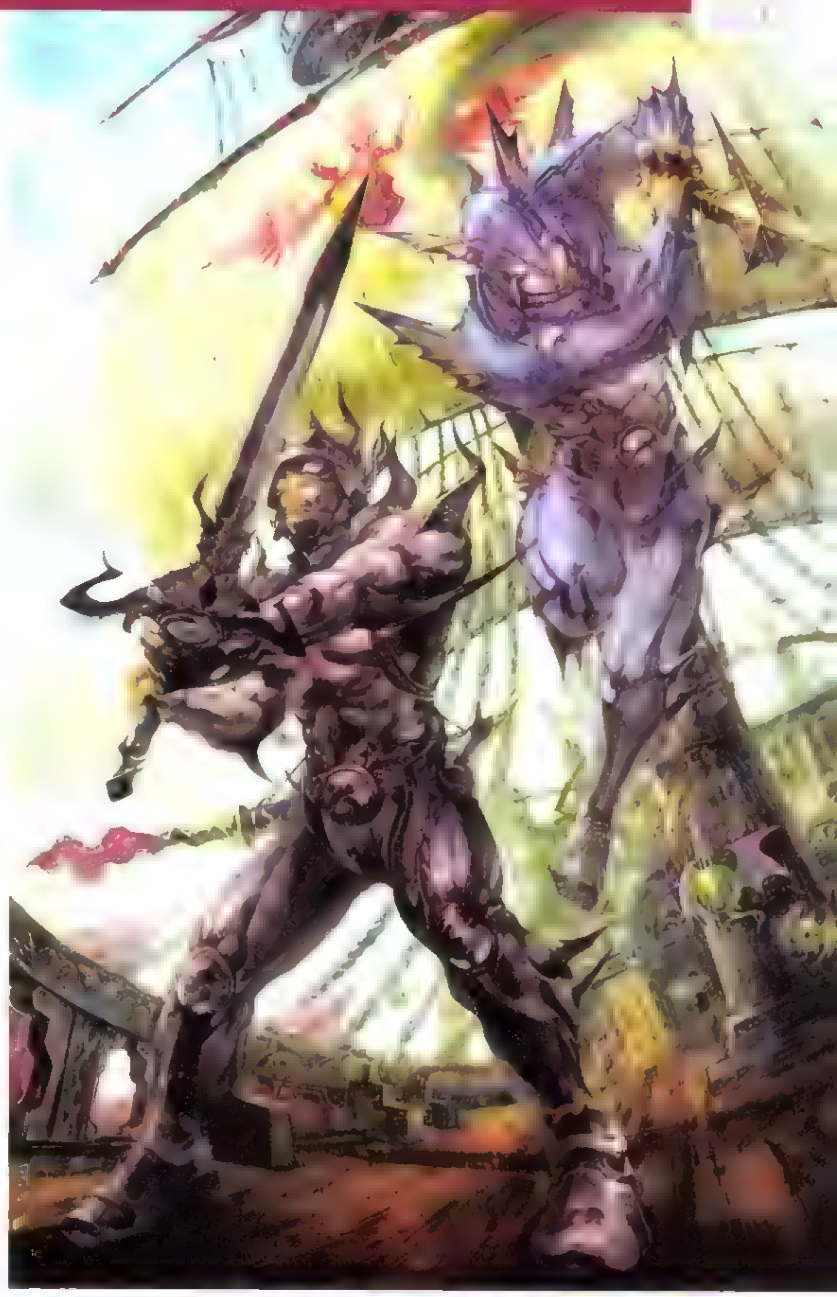
We'll start with the game's engine, which seems to have doubled the polygon count of last year's Final Fantasy III. The more realistically modeled party characters look more detailed than their predecessors, which is a welcome surprise considering the combat engine can now handle five characters on your side and up to six decent-sized enemies (a much-needed upgrade from the tiny enemy parties you faced in FFIII). Summon spells have impressive FFVII-style real-time movies, and the lower screen is constantly being put to good use with detailed automaps and battle data. As the first story-intensive entry in the series, Final Fantasy IV is packed with real-time events that look good, and—for the first time ever—are performed by top Japanese voice talent.

The TGS demo also revealed a number of revamped play mechanics. The most significant is the new "Decant Ability System," in which departing characters pass their abilities on to remaining party members. In the demo you come across a wounded Gilbert (aka Edward) who gives the party a key item that allows any number of characters to equip his Sing move into an empty ability slot. Aim, Jump and even Twin have been spotted in characters that traditionally lacked those abilities, suggesting you'll receive at least one such item from each party member. Other subtle changes abound: Cecil's Dark is now a self-buffing move instead of an overpowered attack, Cid's Peep hits all enemies, and Rydia's summons are cheaper but take extra time to cast.

In a Famitsu interview, Director Takashi Tokita claimed that only 25% of his original story line made it into the original game, and that in the remake he would both insert lost scenarios and remove old scenarios that he now finds embarrassing. The TGS demo stuck pretty close to the story I remembered, but recent Japanese media coverage has revealed a handful of twists, including a new race of creatures known as the Porchka that act as vessels for summon spells and can even join you as customizable party members to fill empty roster slots.

Unlike Final Fantasy III, which made its U.S. debut on the Nintendo DS, Final Fantasy IV has already been remade twice in the last five years. But clearly this remake is not business as usual, and even after playing through both the PlayStation and GameBoy Advance versions, the DS version has left us drooling for more.

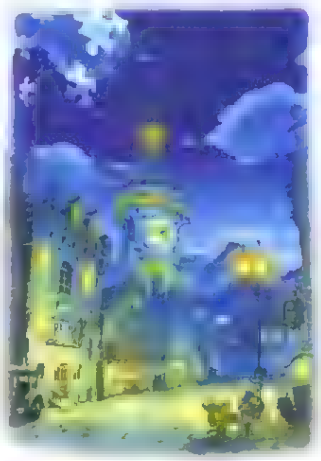
"...the TGS demo revealed the most dramatic overhaul we've ever seen in an FF remake."



square enix cont.

Chocobo's Mystery Dungeon: The Labyrinth of Lost Time

The Mystery Dungeon franchise is hitting the Wii in a big way—like Sega's Shiren, Square's iconic Chocobo is set to star in its third random dungeon crawler this December. The tale is set in a town where everyone has amnesia, and only Chocobo can journey through their minds (the dungeons) to recover the fragments of their memory. This installment uses the classic Final Fantasy Job system for the first time—in the demo, Chocobo could switch to White Mage or Knight classes, and level them up with Job Cubes earned from defeated foes. There were no Wiimote



features, and the game is listed as being fully compatible with the Classic Controller. It's hard to imagine that this title will see a release in the US, since the last Chocobo's Mystery Dungeon basically bombed, but with its adorable graphics and a casual friendly difficulty curve that is unusual for the series, Chocobo looks like a good fit for its platform.

Dissidia Final Fantasy

The much-anticipated Final Fantasy 20th Anniversary Special Project... is not going to make the 20th Anniversary. Of course, if it results in a quality game, we don't really mind. Dissidia Final Fantasy was revealed to much acclaim at the Square Enix Party 2007 in May, and has been given the somewhat unwieldy genre moniker of "Dramatic Progressive Action." Essentially a Final Fantasy All Stars fighting game, only a few characters have been revealed: A Warrior of Light and Garland from FFI, Frioniel from FFII, Squall from FFVIII, Sephiroth from FFVII, and Zidane and Kuja from FFIX. The pattern so far would seem to suggest a hero and villain from each game in the series at least as far as FFIX, so it's probably safe to expect a minimum of 18 characters. No further official

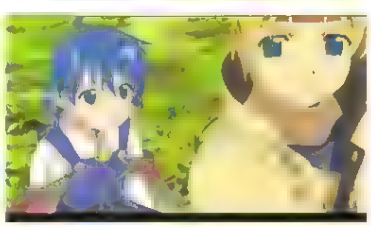
information about the game has been revealed, except for the fact that it will support Wi-Fi play and will arrive in 2008

Dragon Quest IV

Dragon Quest IV is where the series peaked. For my money, it's the greatest Dragon Quest (Yuji Horii) ever made, and the one that holds the most fond memories for me personally. Feeling the heat from Hironobu Sakaguchi's upstart Final Fantasy series, Horii returned to a story-driven format while simultaneously exploding RPG convention. By offering four successive chapters with seemingly no connection all with different party characters, then bringing them crashingly together in the fifth and "final" chapter (in actuality, the true start of the game), Horii succeeded in bringing the genre out of its unfortunate early creative rut. This Nintendo DS version is actually a port of the 2001 PSone remake of the game, and innovatively stretches the entire map across the system's dual screens. The game is due in Japan in November, and although it is surely a lock for US release, no date has been set.

Star Ocean: First Departure & Star Ocean: Second Evolution

It was Star Ocean: The Second Story that really birthed the franchise so it's appropriate that Square has dusted off its engine, ported it to PSP, and used it as the basis for a full remake of the long-forgotten Super Famicom Star Ocean. The resultant Star Ocean: The First Departure now looks even better than its own sequel, thanks to the PSP's widescreen resolution and, of course, a decade worth of advances in pre-rendering quality. Square Enix has also added lengthy animation sequences from Production I.G., voiced everything up, rearranged the soundtrack, and erased all the Star Trek rip...uh (*cough*) homages in the original game. First Departure still feels a little dated, but it looks and sounds spectacular. No release date has been announced for First Departure yet, but when it does hit, Star Ocean: Second Evolution (based on The Second Story) will be



hot on its heels. That one isn't getting a full remake, so its environments look a lot worse, but it will receive new animation, new characters, and a bit of tweaking. That one is a true classic, so all they need to do is tone down the bullshit difficulty in the final dungeon, and I'll be a very happy man.

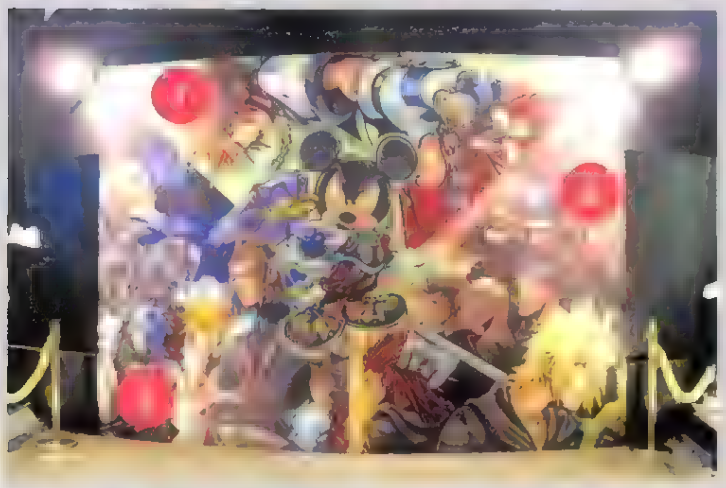
Closed Mega Theater

People hate Square Enix's Closed Mega Theater. I, on the other hand, think it's brilliant marketing. For those unfamiliar with the concept, the Closed Mega Theater is a giant structure that dominates half of Square Enix's booth. You have to wait about three hours in line to get inside. The atmosphere feels almost sanctified, holy, churchlike. Everything you see within its walls will stay there for months, or perhaps even forever. The trailers shown are rarely released to the public, and even when they are it is to members of Square Enix's official fanclub only.

In short, the Closed Mega Theater gets people to TGS in droves. The mad scramble at opening time to get in line for the Theater is incredible, and is traditionally most gamers' first stop of the day. It certainly gets people talking, but most brilliantly, Square Enix peppers commercials for currently released games throughout the trailers you really want to see. Commercial breaks for what is, essentially, a gigantic commercial break? You bet. That's Square Enix style.

So what did we get to see? The first item of significance was the Final Fantasy XIII trailer, exactly the same as it was four months ago at the Square Enix Party 2007. No, wait! Ten seconds of additional footage at the end, revealing a new party member resembling a cross between Selphie from FFVIII and Echidna from The Bouncer, standing on a cliff in a Grand Canyon-esque mesa locale. Yawn. At this point, I'm going to have to see some new in-game footage to get excited about FFXIII again. At least the new "For PlayStation 3 *Only*" (their italics, not mine) at the very end was a nice touch.

What followed was a few minutes of the most jaw-dropping CG work I have ever seen in my life: A new Final Fantasy Versus XIII trailer composed of mostly new footage. The battle scenes from previous videos were certainly spectacular, but it was the subtle facial animation work on three new characters (an old man resembling a mafia don, a lanky blonde youth identified as "Il Fugitivo" in the all-Italian on-screen text, and a female character who confronts the hero at the end) that was most impressive. Square Enix does the best CG in the world. Let's hope a game eventually surfaces, too. The End? Not quite. One final shock remained.



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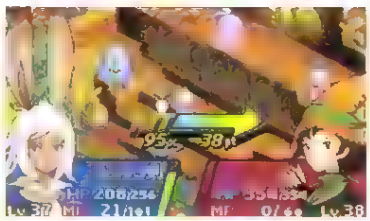


taito

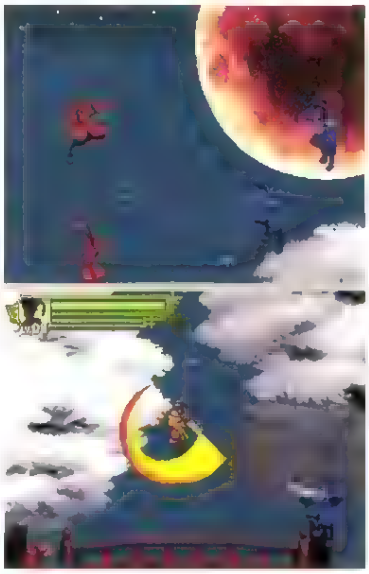
Space Invaders Extreme

Space Invaders on DS? Is there any point? Yeah, there's a point, all right, and it's not just all about the nostalgia. Taito is billing the game as the series' 30th Anniversary project, and the true successor to the Space Invaders name. A cynic might think the company that started the arcade game revolution in Japan is just being quick to cash in on the recent Space Invaders-inspired fashion craze, but upon close inspection you quickly realize they are very serious. Space Invaders Extreme is *fantastic*, marrying the ancient bugs-drop-down, you-shoot-them formula to a Tetsuya Mizuguchi-inspired 21st-century technopop lightshow. New gameplay features like chains and slot-machine-style "fevers" and "jackpots" are very cool, but the real draw for me is going to be the sold-separately DS Paddle Controller peripheral, a module that slots

into the GBA cartridge port to mimic the knobtwirling gameplay of that long-ago 1978 arcade original.

The Legend of Kage 2

Space Invaders was cruel enough, but now Taito is just playing with my heart. As an American boy growing up in the '80s, I was obsessed with all things ninja. I had tabi shoes, I had rubber shuriken, I could pantomime Sho Kosugi's nin-pyo-to-sha-kai-jin-retsu-zai-zen finger-knitting. And I was crazy about Legend of Kage. Ninja Gaiden came later and didn't one better, but I'll never forget protagonist Kage's 100-foot-high jumps and the maddening way you would be forced to rescue the princess three times, the seasons changing each time you did so. This DS sequel, 22 years on, makes brilliant use of the platform's screen layout by catering to Kage's peculiarly *vertical* jumps, allowing players to vault from one screen to the other. Taito also promises a "Scroll Combining System" resulting in 30 possible ninjutsu variations, and a second female playable character. Let it be known. Next February, I will be ninja again.



tecmo

Rygar: The Battle of Argus

I was a very big fan of Tecmo's 2002 Rygar on PlayStation 2, a massively underrated game that got lost in a crush of Devil May Crys and Onimusha 2s back in the day. I'm a Greek mythology nut, and I would have recommended it to anyone with similar interests, half a decade ago. Tecmo, I love you, but porting a five-year-old PS2 game to Wii just because it didn't turn a profit all those moons ago is not the right answer. And no, I don't care if you did add a new "Muscle Mode" motion control scheme designed to promote physical fitness. It's nice that you threw in a few new enemies and redesigned Rygar to give him a 'tude and some tribal tats, but I wish you had done so for a new game. Very disappointing, doubly so when one remembers how "Project Rygar" was being hyped as an original title.

Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword

It wasn't easy to wade through Tecmo's army of companion girls in tiny push-up bras, but it was worth it to get another chance to play Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword. The game's fast and intuitive touch screen action remains as satisfying as ever – you simply tap, slash, and draw on the screen to throw shuriken, use sword moves, and cast ninpo respectively. The game uses only a single button for blocking.

The new demo also showcased some of the game's story sequences, which are presented as well-drawn comic book panels. The first one focuses on Momiji, a new female ninja character who – astonishingly – dresses in conservative ninja garb. But of course, the game's villain provides plenty of T&A – you may recall has as Ishtaros, one of the Mission

Mode bosses from Ninja Gaiden Black and Sigma. Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword still has no set release set date in Japan, but the demo could not have been more polished. Surely this one will be creeping up soon.

marvelous

No More Heroes

If I had things my way, No More Heroes would be game of TGS 2007. The title has style, snappy control and some charming-as-hell gimmicks. In what other Wii game can you answer the Wiimote like a cellphone?

Startlingly mainstream (especially when you consider Killer7), it controls with

analog input on the nunchuck, a-button attacks, and directed swings of the Wiimote. Charging, dashing, and other special attacks follow with a combo of buttons. To focus combat, Grasshopper has employed lock-on z-targeting which with roll dodges gives the game a suspiciously familiar feel.

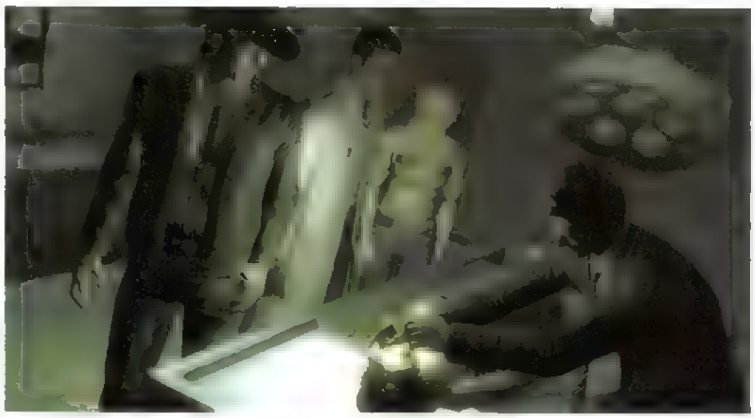
No More Heroes follows Travis Touchdown, an anime otaku who wins a – c'mon, we'll just call it a lightsaber – on an internet auction. Obsessed with money, Travis decides to become a hitman and slays rival Helter Skelter to enter into the hitman club known as the LAA. Gameplay is reportedly sandbox-style, but the demo at TGS was confined to a single warehouse.

No More Heroes is subversive mischievous fun. Travis' town is a California city named Santa Destroy. When your Beam Katana runs out of juice you have to recharge it...by jerking the controller up and down. Yep. And to save a game, Travis heads to a bathroom. It's not as vulgar as words would imply—the game is refreshing, and the combat satisfying even at this early stage.

Rainy Woods

When we first saw shots of Rainy Woods, we scoffed at what was clearly a Silent Hill rip-off. But after seeing the trailer, we realize just how wrong we were—Rainy Woods is in fact a complete *Twin Peaks* rip-off. And while that's not winning developer Access (of *Spy Fiction* semi-fame) any points for creativity, it does leave us intrigued—a *Twin Peaks*-style mystery on next-gen platforms actually sound pretty awesome.

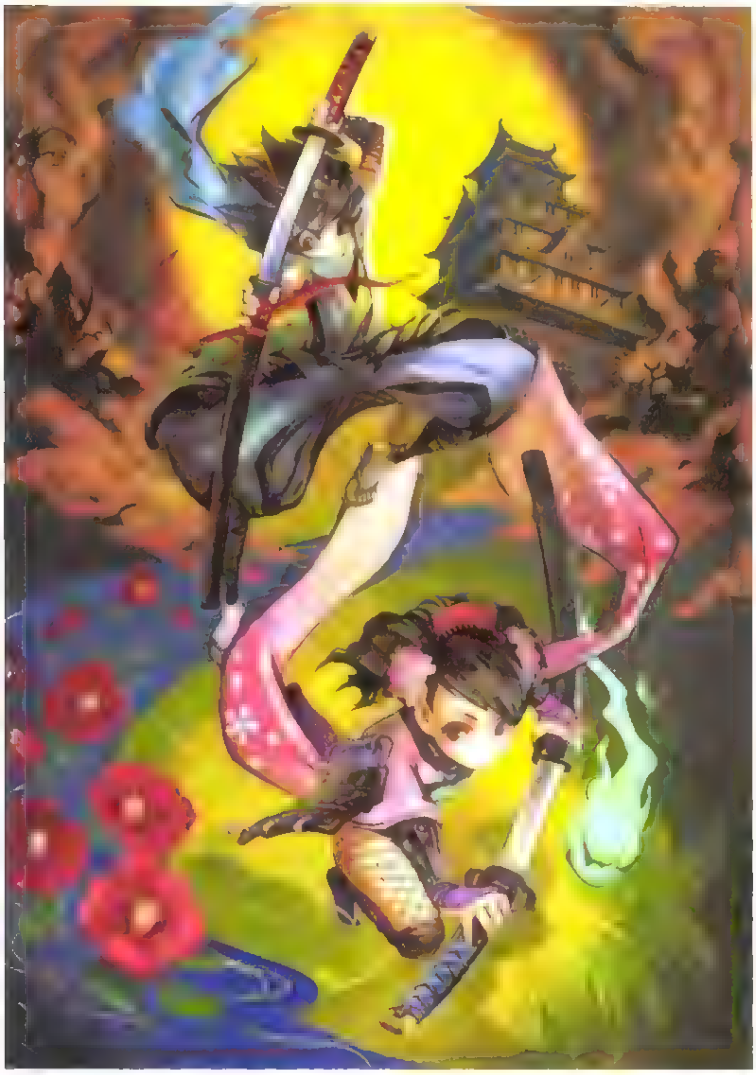
The game concerns the murder of Anna Graham, a young woman whose body was found outside of a small town in the Pacific Northwest with a population of roughly 150. You play FBI agent David Young Henning, who teams up with local sheriff Emily Wyatt to investigate her murder and the many that follow. Rainy Woods is a bizarre town with creepy twin midgets, confusing dream sequences and red velvet decor everywhere and OH MY GOD CAN YOU BELIEVE HOW *TWIN PEAKS* THIS ALL SOUNDS? Seriously, midgets? Anyway, the character models and animation in Rainy Woods aren't going to blow anyone away, but it looks like a pretty solid adventure. One cool aspect is that instead of choosing locations to investigate from a map, you actually hop into a car and drive there in real-time. But the coolest part of all is that even though no domestic release is currently planned the game's dialogue is already entirely in English. With the PS3 version being region-free, this is definitely a title for importers to keep an eye on.

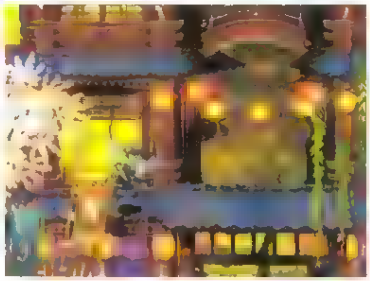


marvelous cont.

Oboro Muramasa Youtouden

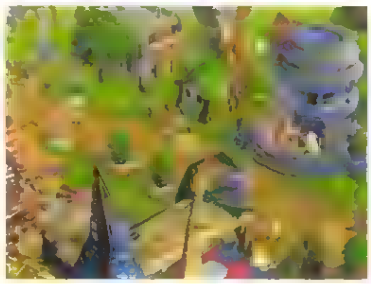
After waiting for nearly a decade between Princess Crown and Odin Sphere, we were prepared to wait a decade longer for Vanillaware's next hand-drawn masterpiece. Little did we know that it was well into development, and already scheduled for a 2008 release from new publisher Marvelous Interactive. Oboro Muramasa Youtouden looks a lot like Odin Sphere, but with strong Japanese influences in place of Odin's European ones. There are a few new twists, such as levels that scroll vertically as well as horizontally, but I think it's fair to call this one a spiritual sequel, or at least a spiritual cousin. As is the trend with Wii games, initial reports touted the game's pick-up-and-play aspects, in which frantic wagging and a single button dish out a variety of context-sensitive moves so that casual gamers can feel like pimps when they're really just button-mashing. Ugh. But wait—Vanillaware hasn't abandoned the hardcore gamers that made Odin Sphere such a massive smash... uh, well, let's say "respectable semi-hit." For us, they're promising a "precise mode" that offers full control over the hero's sword, shuriken, and Ninja techniques via a more complicated and Odin Sphere-esque control scheme. Phew.





Project O (Ousama Monogatari)

With a team that includes the lead programmer of Dragon Quest VIII, the director of the Harvest Moon series, the composer of Kingdom Hearts and the entire staff of Cing (who last made Hotel Dusk), Marvelous Interactive's Project O has been on our radar for quite some time. The game tells the tale of young Corobo Bred, a boy who unexpectedly gains his kingdom's crown and absolute power over his countrymen. He can order his subjects to clear terrain, build houses, and fight off dragons in what looks like a Pikmin-style simulation game with a handful of RPG elements. Along the way, he'll romance princess Apricot Fizz, who I mention only because her name amuses me so. Project O has no English title, publisher, or release date, but we left confident that the team is pursuing an international release. In fact, as with Rainy Woods, the game's humorous cutscenes are already voiced entirely in English. If Marvelous is finally going to set up a North American publishing arm, I can't imagine a better title with which to kick things off.



campaign girls

Capcom VS. SNK

Luke

cosplay

KartRider

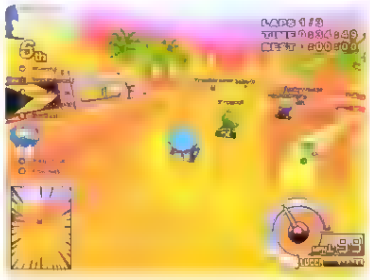
In case you're wondering if this game is *that* KartRider, the online title that 25% of South Korea was playing at one point...yep, this is the one. Nexon's phenomenally popular online kart racer is finally coming to US servers this fall, and Nexon America is pushing hard to make KartRider another runaway success story in the west. KartRider's core gameplay is similar to titles in the Mario Kart series—a very positive comparison echoed by many US beta testers. If you have an interest in classic kart racer gameplay and track layouts, cute super-deformed character design and online racing with a ton of unlockable extras, you've found your game.

So what's inside the KartRider formula that has hooked over 100 million users across the globe? A surprisingly deep kart racing adventure that runs smoothly on just about any configuration of PC. Easy arrow key direction controls allow any PC user to pick up the basics, while the ubiquitous drift play mechanic (a well-timed hold and release of Shift) rewards improvement and track memorization. Nexon America will invite players to download KartRider for free and race alone or in teams against opponents from across the US and Canada. An item shop will offer players optional items, decals, paints, weapons and parts that can be purchased with earned in-game credit and small micro-transactions.

KartRider offers an interesting progress on path. You start out with a Rookie ranking and earn Race Points (RP) as you succeed in multiplayer races. After you accumulate enough points you'll be able to challenge the License training courses. Here racers partake in specific challenges, earn how to use items, and master the art of drifting. Complete your license and you'll be able to enter higher ranking multiplayer contests on new tracks. As a deterrent to big shots trolling on lower-tier servers and spoiling the fun, KartRider awards significantly fewer points when playing against lower level racers.

The Mario Kart comparisons flow when you look at KartRider's super colorful tracks, and that's a good thing. Nexon has designed a series of very distinct courses, as evidenced by themes like Desert Drift, Arctic Rim, Floopy Forest and Zerostone Mine. Each track has its own perils, like twisters, ice blocks and fire. KartRider divides its race types between Speed mode (no items, good drifting earns boost) and Item mode, where players assault the competition with banana peels, homing missiles, magnets, water bombs and more. Stay alert, take advantage of shield power ups, and save some firepower for the home stretch...

With its happy racing tunes, bright, colorful menus, and extremely accessible classic kart racing gameplay, KartRider's massive success in other territories comes as no surprise. It has an appeal that reaches across age groups and demographics, and the flexible system requirements allow nearly any PC to partake. Navigate your browser to kart.nexon.net and take KartRider out for a spin.



KartRider	
System(s)	PC
Developer	Nexon Korea
Publisher	Nexon America
Online/Multi	Online/Multiplayer
Available	October

Sam & Max Season Two

And you thought Chinese toys were packin' lead…

Mike Griffin

When episodic gaming started making headlines again a few years ago, as Valve lent their prize fighter to the concept and the doomed SiN Episodes entered the fray, who could've thought that a comedy adventure series would be one of the champions of the episodic mode by 2007? Well, Telltale Games obviously thought so. And after last year's wildly successful first season of Sam & Max, Telltale is bringing the detective duo (a man-sized talking dog and a strange rabbity-thing) back for another season of mad gags and absurd, cerebral banter. Ice Station Santa, the first episode of Season Two, hits hard drives on November 8 via GameTap and a day later through Telltale.

Steve Purcell, creator of Sam & Max, continues to be impressed by the funny and efficient work of Telltale Games. "First seasons are always the proving ground," said the artist and writer. "It's great that they get the chance to take Sam & Max through a new season of ever more bizarre and hilarious episodes."

In Ice Station Santa, Sam and Max will travel to the North Pole to investigate the world's most notorious jelly belly, Santa Claus himself. Christmas presents have suddenly turned to the dark side. The laughter of children has been replaced by squeals of terror as Torture Me Elmer dolls deck the halls with gunshots. To get to the bottom of this scrooge-like plot, Sam & Max must visit Santa's Workshop

("The Second Happiest Place on Earth" says the sign on the shop's roof) and enlist the aid of a cast of spooked elves to find out who's been naughty. Will the trail really lead back to Saint Nick? Perhaps it's not so easy being jolly.

In addition to a nutty holiday narrative, adventure puzzles aplenty, and an underground rat boxing tournament mini-game (what the?), Ice Station Santa will introduce an improved engine that includes full widescreen support. "For Season Two, we have taken all the best elements of the first season and improved on them. Telltale is cranking the whole episodic experience up another notch and you can expect a very enjoyable six months," said Telltale's jubilant CEO Dan Connors. We can already confirm that Episode 2 of the season is scheduled for January 10, destined to have a plot that's even more cracked, new mini-games, and slick collectible upgrades for the DeSoto (the duo's vehicle). Do your funny bone a favor and play through Sam & Max Season One before the new episodes arrive.

Sam & Max Season Two
Episode 1: Ice Station Santa

System(s)	PC
Developer	Telltale
Publisher	GameTap
Online/Multi	None
Available	November

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

Disable the MCP!

words Mike Griffin

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars is a succulent dish for hardcore multiplayer shooter fans. Combining familiar bits of history and technology from id Software's Quake universe (circa 2065) with the multiplayer expertise of Splash Damage has resulted in a very polished and enjoyable addition to the franchise.

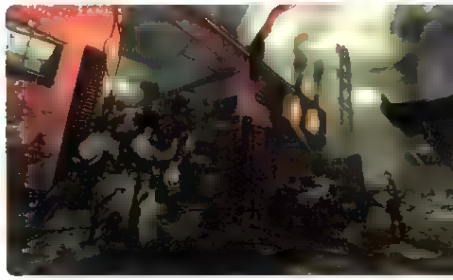
Quake fans that have always wondered how the Strogg vs. GDF campaign was fought on Earth will think to ET:QW's campaigns across the 12 big maps. You'll see where the Strogg advance was halted and find out how the humans acquired Strogg technology. Consider a map like Quarry, for example: a Strogg space cruiser crash landed in an old mining ravine. The Strogg side must gather three energy cells and take them to the disabled ship in order to activate the vessel's self-destruct sequence. If they fail this mission, they've handed the GDF the secrets to deep space travel. The Makron will *not* be pleased. Each map has a brief but effective background story that successfully links mission objectives to the overall Quake narrative.

If you come into Quake Wars with no previous Enemy Territory (Wolfenstein) experience, you'll have to wrap your head around the concept of selectable missions in a fast-paced, moment to moment multiplayer FPS. It's a little confusing at first, but a lot of that difficulty—as with any multiplayer shooter—is mitigated as you learn the maps. After you master the mission system, darting from objective to objective during the campaign can be extremely satisfying. It evokes a great sense of urgency and ensures you have direction all the time. It's a great system, and the way your XP and rank accumulates during a campaign (progressively unlocking class skill enhancements in categories that reflect *your* play style) is brilliant.

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars fortifies its campaign with fine raw FPS gameplay.

"...the way your XP and rank accumulates during a campaign is brilliant."

A huge map like Slipgate peaks with a vicious close-quarters battle in the bowels of a Strogg base, and it feels good enough to remind you of a corridor-style deathmatch like Quake 3. Great action and focus, excellent graphics, fun vehicles, satisfying classes... this one's a winner.



The radically modified Doom 3 engine impresses.

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars — score

Mission system is highly involving and rewarding once mastered. Can't get enough of the Icarus jetpack flashbacks to Tribes.

If you're not an experienced online FPS player, stuff like [illegible]

Developer	id Software
Publisher	[illegible]
Online/Multi	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]
ESRB Rating	[illegible]

You Are Empty

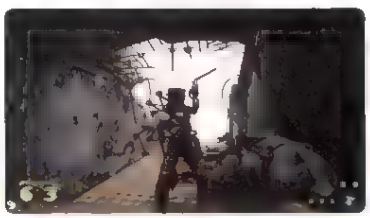
words Mike Griffin

If all the obscure imports that Atari is publishing, why did they choose this one? Man, what a stinker. You Are Empty already has one foot in the grave thanks to its ridiculous title, and it doesn't take long before this first-person shooter's woefully inept execution offers you a shovel and casket to finish the job. It's a shame that the gameplay and enemy design and AI are so deathly poor because You Are Empty has some standout environments (especially from mid game onward) and very interesting and disturbing cinematics.

In this late 1950's alternate history, the Soviet Union has taken its campaign of communism to an all new low, as scientists create genetically modified super humans to spread the seeds of socialism. Inevitably these experiments go awry, and now mega mutant commies are on the prowl, terrorizing whole cities. These mutants are truly frightening creations: I haven't seen three dimensional FPS enemies this crude and hideously animated in years. Factor in the nauseatingly feeble creature sound effects that repeat like a parrot on crack when enemies get stuck on objects (which is often, because the AI is shite), and any possible joy is sapped from enemy encounters. This tends to be an important area in a shooter. To complete the action tour-de-force, the weapons feel soft and ineffectual and the physics are archaic.

If you receive You Are Empty as a gift or spot it at a dramatically discounted price, it may be worth trudging through the game to take in some of the eyes (like the capital city) and to witness the wonderfully unsettling cinematics. Mixing a stylized graphic novel aesthetic with Cold War-era motif, the main character's nebulous childhood is chronicled in these strange, well-directed storyboards. On the other hand, I'm not in the habit of recommending FPS titles based on small fragments of OK level design and cool between-mission movies. Avoid this game.

"...experiments go awry, and now mega mutant commies are on the prowl..."

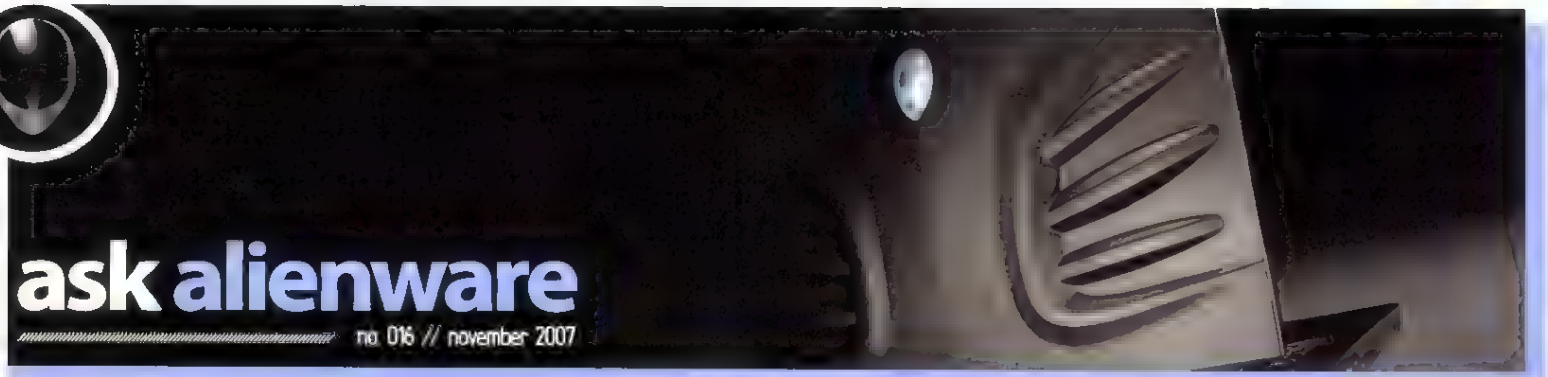


Repugnant foes help to ruin the show.

You Are Empty — score

[illegible]

Developer	Digital Spray
Publisher	Atari
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	October
ESRB Rating	RP



ask alienware

no. 016 // november 2007

Q. I have a pretty strange question. Can I set up a motherboard that normally operates as a server to operate as a gaming computer? I noticed that there are server motherboards that have two slots for 64-bit cores and eight slots (8 GB) for dual channel memory! I know it will be more expensive tenfold but the gaming power seems like it would be amazing! I have never done this before and hoped that you would be able to help or deter me from doing so.

C. Audio, New York NY

Typically, server motherboards will provide larger memory slots for dual channel memory configurations up to 16GB, although you will have to run a 64-bit version of an operating system in order for your OS to recognize all that memory. The system's high level of power will definitely be noticeable, but probably not in standard applications or even in most games. If you are interested in running applications like CAD and audio-visual applications, then you should probably be looking at a workstation-class board and high memory configurations.

Q. Is it worth buying one of these 1920x1200 or 2500x1650 computer displays if I'm going to watch movies on it? I know games look gorgeous on those, but won't films get sliced or squished beyond their normal ratios since those aren't typical TV resolutions? On the flipside I'm also looking at 1080p home theatre displays. Do most PC games allow correct 1080p output?

Jason, Burnaby BC

If you are planning on watching a lot of movies on your PC, you should definitely opt for a good 1080p LCD HDTV. Most PCs will output to a correct resolution of 1080p and most games support the resolution standard of 1080p due to the fact that more and more people are bringing their PC games into the living room. When shopping for a LCD HDTV, make sure you are getting one that provides "full 1080p" resolution and a high contrast ratio (such as 50 000:1).

Q. I am a game enthusiast and Animation major who has had an Alienware Aurora system for about three and a half years but my system is getting a bit outdated. I need to be able to multi-task with hefty programs like Maya, Z-brush, Photoshop and After FX sometime and at the same time, as well as render very high quality images (and play sweet games). Since video cards, RAM and other hardware is easily upgradable I need to start with a CPU that will last me a while. So, I want to set up a Dual Xeon Quad workstation. But I'm having a hard time deciding what Motherboard to choose and what type of Xeon, since these hardware components are fairly new to me and I can't find much info. Thanks.

Christian, San Francisco CA

The first thing you need to do is make sure your chassis is capable of mounting whichever motherboard you choose. The chassis on your current Aurora system is the Alienware P1, which is an ATX chassis that is not capable of mounting any E-ATX motherboards. However, Alienware's current P2 chassis is an E-ATX chassis that is capable of mounting workstation-class E-ATX, or BTX, motherboards. Once you have the proper chassis, you can find a large selection of Quad-Core Intel Xeon-ready motherboards from many retailers and outlets on the web. Most of the newer motherboards available should be capable of supporting a high-end Quadro card and sound card.

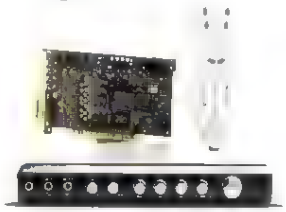
Q. I insist on using cordless products. Which wireless specification is faster and more reliable, Bluetooth or radio-frequency style (2.4 GHz)? Is there something that one cordless format excels at more than the other?

Kurt, Toronto ON

Both Bluetooth and 2.4GHz wireless have their advantages and disadvantages. For example, Bluetooth is ideal for quickly connecting to devices that require little to no wireless configurations or setups. In addition, household electronics don't interfere with Bluetooth like they can with a 2.4GHz wireless signal. On the other hand, since 2.4GHz wireless is the current wireless standard, that's the one you'll find the most peripherals for. Also, Bluetooth peripherals tend to be more expensive and the range is smaller than 2.4GHz.

Q. I'm thinking about ordering a new PC and I'd like to know if any of the gaming sound cards are capable enough to double as a sound solution for audio editing work.

John, Spring TX



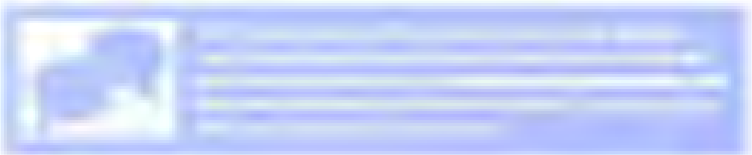
Your best bet is to check out some of the advanced sound cards from Creative, such as the SoundBlaster X-Fi Elite Pro. This should provide you with the quality and features you need for first-rate audio editing as well as gaming.

Q. How much data can you recover through a Windows recovery point? Also how often should I schedule my computer for the creation of a new recovery point?

Russell, Harrington QC

A Windows recovery point will back up your entire PC, including content, as well as drivers and software. You should schedule your PC for recovery points based on your individual usage. As a general rule, the more you use your computer, the more you should back it up.

Please visit us at **www.alienware.com/ask** to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest new products.



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Hellgate: London devouring souls this Halloween

By the time you read this, Hellgate: London will be less than two weeks away from its October 31 release. You've heard all about the game's classes, abilities and monsters by now, but how much do you know about the game's future plans? We tapped a very busy Bill Roper, CEO of Hellgate developer Flagship Studios, for all the details.

"Free players can not only get online and play, but they will also be able to join guilds, access the auction house, use the in-game email... we're giving players so much more than we did in Diablo II."

Bill Roper

Interview

Bill Roper, CEO **Flagship Studios**

play: Hellgate: London is arriving with two online options. What will the free online players receive and what does the ($9.95/month) subscription provide? How does your service compare to what you offered players in Diablo II?

Bill Roper: We've worked incredibly hard to provide an amazing value with Hellgate: London. We have two ways that players can experience the game online. Most importantly is that we give our players a free way to play! Players can go online and share this experience with their friends, for free. We host players on our secure servers and offer them a great gaming and community experience at no cost. Free players can not only get online and play, but they will also be able to join guilds, access the auction house, use the in-game email, and more. We're giving players so much more than we did in Diablo II, and this is something we've worked for since day one.

For gamers that want more, we also have a subscription service that provides access to ongoing content that touches all areas of the game. This includes special events, contests, community features, increased character slots, more stash space, new monsters, armor types, weapons, areas, skills, spells, pets, damage types, gameplay modes, and even character classes! We're dedicated to growing Hellgate: London for our players.

Let's put the online element aside for a sec. What is Hellgate going to offer in the realm of single-player, offline campaign?

The single-player experience offers 40-50 hours of story-driven gameplay. And because Hellgate is dynamically generated with rarity being a huge part of every part of the game, you can play through the story multiple times—especially with different character classes! We know that not all gamers want to or can go online, so providing a fun and compelling stand alone experience was important to us.

Moving forward, how is Flagship going to add value to the Hellgate: London experience? How frequently can users expect big updates?

Online RPG gamers today crave a constant stream of new things to keep their game world turning. With Hellgate: London, we finally have a way to do this. Our goal is to have a stream of content that happens quite frequently, so that there is always something right around the corner. We're currently working on some ideas we can put together for even the first weeks of the game's life that will be unique so that our earliest subscribers get something no one else has. We'll continue to do these sorts of events, quests, items, areas and so forth all the time. And then there is what I think of as the big updates around every three months. These updates are designed to introduce major things into our world, like completely new areas, item types and monster groups. Also bigger things like new game play modes and play experiences, damage types, and new character classes.

Player vs. Player options can be a deal maker for some people. What kind of PVP ideas are you experimenting with internally?

We'll be starting our PVP plans out in a very focused way. We currently have three different ways of approaching it, although it centers mainly on a dueling system at the moment. There are a handful of examples of good RPG PVP games, and it would really have been impossible for us to do everything we did to launch Hellgate: London and also try and create a deep, rich, full-blown PVP system on top of that. We have some serious PVP advocates here at Flagship, so for those players, you can rest assured we'll continue working towards a truly compelling experience in this area.

Thanks Bill. We'll see you in game on All Hallows Eve!

Ventilate boss demons with big guns.

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THE THIRD
ザ・サード

The surprise anime of the year, *The Third* continues to deliver, fixing my eyes to the screen and my mind to the amazing universe it portrays—a desert planet as harsh as it's tranquil and beautiful. Honoka and the AI system that runs her sand tank, Bogie, make a living on the frontier safeguarding the people of Emporium and peacefully coexisting with The Third—the ruling class of the planet. Tensions are running high, however, as volume 2 gets underway after Fila Marique, council woman of The Third, sends the Auto-Enforcer Blue Breaker to engage Honoka's closest friend and ally, Zankan, who also happens to be the greatest mechanic on the frontier having recently transformed her agile PSP mobile suit into an omnipotent fighting machine. When the dust settles Zankan is dead, leaving his only daughter Millie devastated and alone. Honoka takes Millie in—it's a big tank—but they're both having trouble coping, especially after Millie spots Honoka's astral eye, the mark of The Third. Honoka's third eye is red, however, as opposed to The Third's blue, but I digress. There's not much time for grieving as Blue Breaker returns to finish the job... The episodes that follow range in impetus and emotion more so than any anime series in recent memory. The writing is superb and the English dub invisible. Episode 7 is especially poignant, a tranquil refrain to ponder the alien desert before being swept away by the spectacle of a sand dragon stampede as episode 8 presents yet another sobering twist. Something is stirring under the desert so powerful that even The Third are distressed, so be very, very afraid. Whatever it is you can bet that Honoka and Bogie will be right in the middle of it, and I'll be watching.

"The Third continues to deliver, fixing my eyes to the screen and my mind to the amazing universe it portrays."

The Third
Vol. 2: Tending Wounds

Score

Right Stuf is really onto something with The Third. Definitely a breath of fresh desert air.

Episodes can be somewhat schizophrenic.

Released By	[illegible]
Volume	2
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	5
Rating	15
Available	Now

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Glass Fleet

It's been a long time since I've seen space opera as well done as Funimation's *Glass Fleet*. Heck, it's been awhile since I've seen good space opera, period. Going down the list, this *Fleet*'s got it all: swashbuckling action, epic space battles, even a love triangle—though this one happens to be between three men. Count on anime to throw curves into even the most tried and true formulas.

The Holy Emperor of a decadent regime, Vetti Sforza, has become even more corrupt than the nobility he deposed. The oppressed people turn to Michel Volban, a brash, young noble with whom Sforza is obsessed. The Empire seems to have Volban captured when a strange battleship, crewed by misfits and outcasts, rescues him and begins our tale.

Though at first it feels slightly clichéd, *Glass Fleet* quickly moves out of the ordinary and into the extraordinary, particularly when Michel encounters Sforza himself in a most unexpected place. *Fleet* blends just the right balance of lightning-fast action with plot exposition—it's one of the better paced anime I've seen in that regard.

As a fan of space opera (who doesn't miss blowing up Kilrathi?) it's easy to sing *Fleet*'s praises, particularly its visuals, sound, and even its slightly hackneyed story. It's as if you'd stilled the best elements of '80s space anime—*Robotech*, *Space Battleship Yamato*, even *Mobile Suit Gundam*—and updated them with modern animation and CG techniques. The result? A series that feels somehow bracingly fresh and comfortably familiar at the same time. **Bill Gray**

Glass Fleet — score

Who doesn't enjoy a night at the space opera?

Released By	Funimation
Volume	[illegible]
Running Time	25 minutes
Episodes	[illegible]
Rating	[illegible]
Available	October [illegible]

Xenosaga the Animation

One of the few RPG series I haven't followed religiously, watching *Xenosaga The Animation* sent me to the game closet. Apparently, home away from home isn't going so well for humanity circa 4768. Scattered among distant planets and artificial colonies, we join the crew of the spaceship Woglinde as they fall under attack from the Gnosis, a swarm of alien life forms they've been forced to engage to protect the Zohar, a mysterious monolith with seemingly unlimited powers. Their only hope lies in a WMD (woman of mass destruction) codename KOS-MOS, a battle android designed by Shion Uzuki, the volume 1 protagonist, although she doesn't seem to have much of a handle on its AI. ...and so the adventure begins. Based on Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht (for PS2), some liberties have been taken with the story, while certain areas not clear in the game have been fleshed-out, giving both gamers a reason to watch and anime fans a reason to play. Toei Animation certainly did their part. Although the rendered elements look somewhat dated, the character design and animation, given the miniscule budgets allotted for TV series, is excellent and the pacing nicely tightened up for the adaptation. **Dave Halverson**

> "Toei Animation certainly did their part."

Xenosaga the Animation — score

Great character and world design

Released By	[illegible]
Volume	[illegible]
Running Time	[illegible]
Episodes	[illegible]
Rating	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

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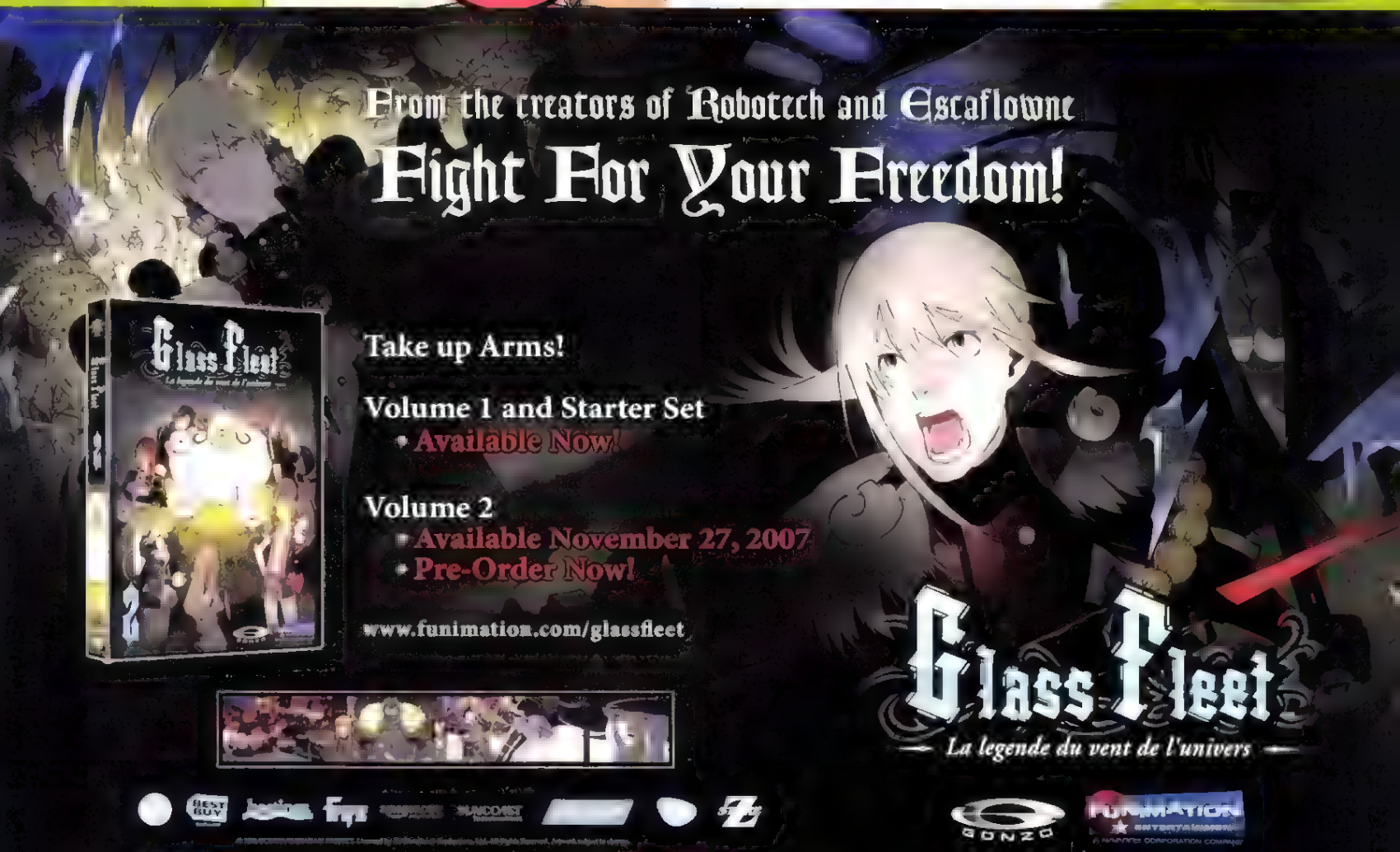
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Innocent Venus

Innocent Venus unravels after a mass of ultra-violent storms all but decimate the planet, wiping out over 60 percent of the world's population. North America, Russia and Northern Europe are encased in ice. Japan however has achieved a limited recovery through Powered Assist Technology. It's also become a haven for tyranny. On one side, the wealthy—referred to as "Logos"—control special zones in the country containing most of the wealth and resources using an elite military group known as Phantom that breeds its own brand of psychotic super soldiers to rule with an iron fist. Standing between them and the lower class, called "Levinas," are the rebels—a rag-tag network of mercs and techies, including ex-Phantom soldiers Jo and Jin, who managed to escape Phantom's grasp with a very special young girl, codename Venus. Phantom wants her back, badly, but they'll have to go through Jo and Jin first, which so far has proven to be an insurmountable task. With a little help from their friends and a pair of lethal mobile suits they guard her with their lives. Why? That's what we're here to find out as we soak in one of the

"North America, Russia and Northern Europe are encased in ice."

most Byzantine new series this year. *Innocent Venus* is a beautiful show, combining cel shading with traditional animation as it snakes between somber, funny, and furious with the greatest of ease. **Dave Halverson**

Innocent Venus — score

Released By	ADV Films
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	TV-14
Available	Now

Pumpkin Scissors

Taking on tanks with a handgun, even one of the 13 mm variety, can be hazardous to your health. Corporal Randel Oland has the scars to prove it. As part of a unit known as the 901st ATT (Anti-Tank Troopers), Randel finds himself at a loss when the great war between the Royal Empire and the Republic of Frost comes to an abrupt end. That is, until he meets hotheaded Lt. Alice Malvin, the diminutive engine of the Empire's "war relief" unit, aka Pumpkin Scissors.

ADV's latest release from Studio GONZO, *Pumpkin Scissors* takes the typical war anime and turns it on its head. Instead of depicting the war itself, it shows its effects on the common people as well as professional soldiers. The unusual setup makes for an interesting watch, as Malvin's unit travels the countryside atoning for the sins of the Empire. These transgressions turn out to be even more serious than anyone realized when Pumpkin Scissors stumbles upon a "black ops" program known as The Invisible 9—and that's just in the first episode.

The fun of *Scissors* is in the everyday interactions of Malvin's unit; in the paradox of Randel's gentle nature and his role as a tank-killer (the man has demons); in the slow unraveling of the military conspiracy at the core of the pumpkin; and, of course, in the beauteous GONZO animation. However, unless you really like bad German accents, you'll have to mar those pretty pictures with subtitles, as the dubbing is a material distraction from the fun of the show. **Bill Gray**

Pumpkin Scissors — score

Released By	ADV Films
Volume	1
Running Time	300 minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	TV-MA
Available	Now

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The Haunted World of

El Superbeasto

Rob Zombie invades toon town

O[illegible] Rob Zombie's gone from horror [illegible] one of the most successful horror [illegible] by the recent success [illegible] which broke Labor-Day box office re- [illegible] lion dollars over the holiday weekend. [illegible] all around—but the fi[illegible] animated feature, The Haunted [illegible] "superhero/monster/sex [illegible] when Paul Giamatti [illegible]

interview

by Matt Cabral

Rob, what can you tell us about The Haunted World of El Superbeasto?
Rob Zombie: It comes out next year sometime. It's almost finished... almost 100% but not quite finished yet. It's a totally ridiculous movie—a superhero/monster/sex comedy. It's totally different than anything I've done before.

Sounds both awesome and bizarre. How did you come up with this?
I'd done a series of comic books a few years ago with the character El Superbeasto, and it was one of the most popular things I'd done, so I decided to expand it. I pitched the idea to Phil Roman from the company that does The Simpsons and King of the Hill...they loved it, so we started making the movie.

Is it going to be a theatrical or DVD release?
Theatrical. It's going to be great...Paul Giamatti plays the part of the lead villain, Dr. Satan. It's a very funny movie.

Sounds like a difficult film to place into one particular genre. Is it horror, humor...?
Basically humor. It's kind of like Austin Powers meets The Munsters...totally humorous.

It's got the look and vibe of a potential franchise. Could we maybe see an El Superbeasto television series or video game?
Probably not a TV series...it's for adults. It's pretty raunchy so I don't think it would be on television.

So we're talking a definite R rating for the film then?
For sure, yeah!

What type of animation are you using for the film? CGI, hand-drawn...?
It's classic cel...classic looking animation.

What's your level of involvement in the film aside from the creation of the characters?
I wrote the script and oversaw the whole project. The animation is done in like Korea, so you do all the animatic and the drawing here, and then it's all shipped off overseas and animated.

Any specific inspiration behind the project for you? Are you a fan of classic animation?
Well, I'm not really even a fan of animation. Mostly because I think it's for kids, and that kind of bores me. I wanted to do something that was adult.

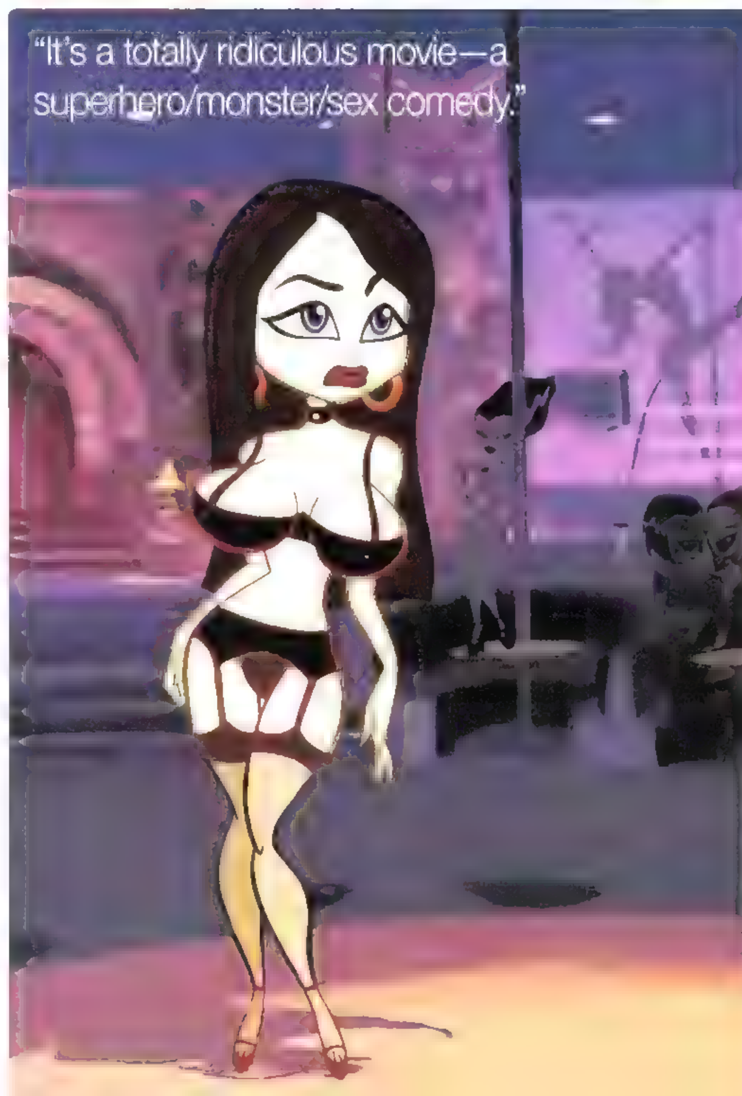
Could El Superbeasto work as a live-action film?
Actually I think it probably could. It'd probably work great.

Aside from Paul Giamatti, what other cast do you have lined up?
We've got Tom Papa who's a stand up comic...he plays El Superbeasto. Tom Kenny who is the voice of SpongeBob plays Otto, Paul Giamatti's sidekick. And Sheri, my wife, plays Susie-X, who is El Superbeasto's sister. Rosario Dawson plays Velvet Von Black, Dr. Satan's obsession. He's obsesses with chasing this stripper as his unholy bride.

Paul Giamatti sounds perfect for that role. How'd you score that casting?
He read the script, loved it, and wanted to do it.

So when can we start lining up to see El Superbeasto?
Sometime in 2008.

Can't wait! Aside from us, who do you think the target audience is for this film?
I'm not exactly sure...people that like filthy cartoons.



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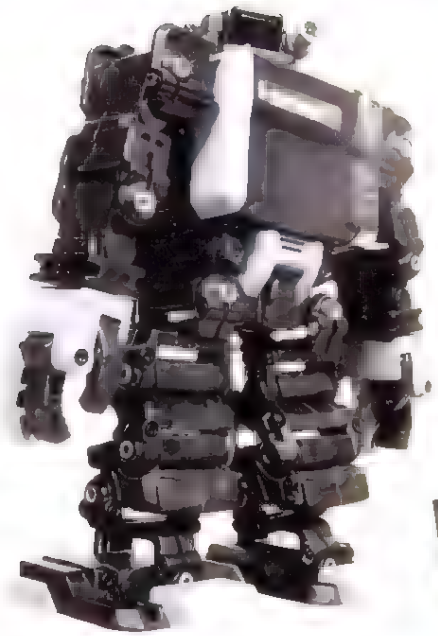

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Halo, by the book..

[illegible]

Tor Books

First-time novelist Joseph Staten started with Bungie Studios in 1998 where he's served as designer for ONI, and writer and cinematics director for all three Halos. Halo: Contact Harvest reveals the state of the Halo universe leading up to humanity's first contact with the Covenant—a chance encounter that catapults mankind into a struggle for its very existence. Readers will experience the start of the Human-Covenant war from the perspective of Staff Sergeant Avery Johnson, Master Chief's legendary confidant and mentor as they follow the young Sergeant's adventures, gaining terrifying insights into both the Covenant's genocidal fury and the vicious civil war that threatened to destroy humanity's fledgling interstellar empire, even before the Covenant got their chance. $14.95 At bookstores everywhere

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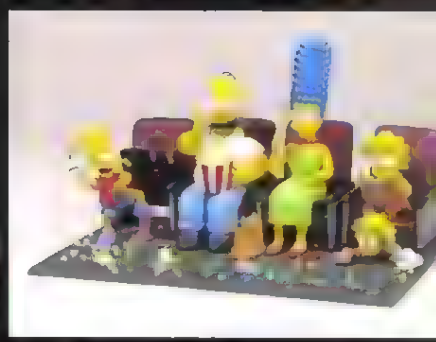

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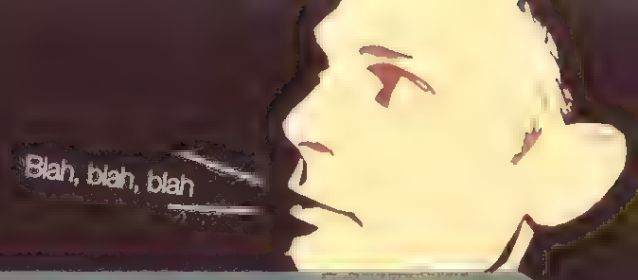
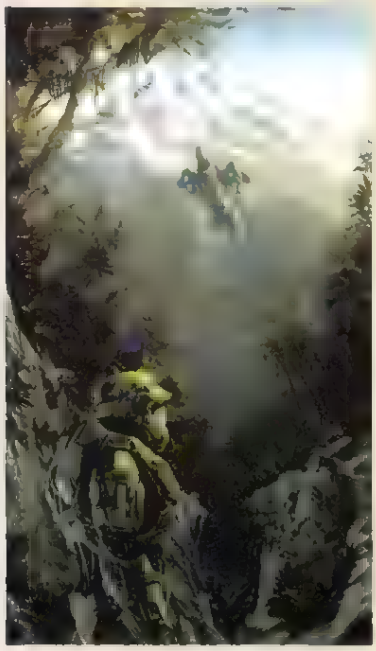


EXECUTIVE EDITOR

'Bungie has achieved something extraordinary with Halo 3 that reaches beyond the code of their efforts.'



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